

The Old Genie Hottabych

A Story of Make-Believe

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The Old Genie Hottabych

This amusing and fascinating children's book is often called the Russian "Thousand and One Nights".

Who is the Old Genie Hottabych?

This is what the author has to say of him: "In one of Scheherezade's tales I read of the Fisherman who found a copper vessel in his net. In the vessel was a mighty Genie - a magician who had been imprisoned in the bottle for nearly two thousand years. The Genie had sworn to make the one who freed him rich, powerful and happy.

"But what if such a Genie suddenly came to life in the Soviet Union, in Moscow? I tried to imagine what would have happened if a very ordinary Russian boy had freed him from the vessel.

"And imagine, I suddenly discovered that a schoolboy named Volka Kostylkov, the very same Volka who used to live on Three Ponds Street, you know, the best diver at summer camp last year.... On second thought, I believe we had better begin from the beginning...."

A MOST UNUSUAL MORNING

At 7:32 a.m. a merry sun-spot slipped through a hole in the curtain and settled on the nose of Volka Kostylkov, a 6th-grade pupil. Volka sneezed and woke up.

Just then, he heard his mother say in the next room:

"Don't rush, Alyosha. Let the child sleep a bit longer, he has an exam today."

Volka winced. When, oh when, would his mother stop calling him a child?

"Nonsense!" he could hear his father answer. "The boy's nearly thirteen. He might as well get up and help us pack. Before you know it, this child of yours will be using a razor."

How could he have forgotten about the packing!

Volka threw off the blankets and dressed hurriedly. How could he ever have forgotten such a day!

This was the day the Kostylkov family was moving to a different apartment in a new six-storey house. Most of their belongings had been packed the night before. Mother and Grandma had packed the dishes in a

little tin tub that once, very long ago, they had bathed Volka in. His father had rolled up his sleeves and, with a mouthful of nails, just like a shoemaker, had spent the evening hammering down the lids on crates of books.

Then they had all argued as to the best place to put the things so as to have them handy when the truck arrived in the morning. Then they had their tea on an uncovered table-as on a march. Then they decided their heads would be clearer after a good night's sleep and they all went to bed.

In a word, there was just no explaining how he could have ever forgotten that this was the morning they, were moving to a new apartment.

The movers barged in before breakfast was quite over. The first thing they did was to open wide both halves of the door and ask in loud voices, "Well, can we begin?"

"Yes, please do," both Mother and Grandma answered and began to bustle about.

Volka marched downstairs, solemnly carrying the sofa pillows to the waiting truck.

"Are you moving?" a boy from next door asked.

"Yes," Volka answered indifferently, as though he was used to moving from one apartment to another every week and there was nothing very special about it.

The janitor, Stepanych, walked over, slowly rolled a cigarette and began an unhurried conversation as one grown-up talk to another. The boy felt dizzy with pride and happiness. He gathered his courage and invited Stepanych to visit them at their new home. The janitor said, "With pleasure." A serious, important, man-to-man conversation was beginning, when all at once Volka's mother's voice came through the open window:

"Volka! Volka! Where can that awful child be?" Volka raced up to the strangely large and empty apartment in which shreds of old newspapers and old medicine bottles were lying forlornly about the floor.

"At last!" his mother said. "Take your precious aquarium and get right into the truck. I want you to sit on the sofa and hold the aquarium on your lap. There's no other place for it. But be sure the water doesn't splash on the sofa."

It's really strange, the way parents worry when they're moving to a new apartment.

THE STRANGE VESSEL

Well, the truck finally choked exhaustedly and stopped at the attractive entrance of Volka's new house. The movers quickly carried

everything upstairs and soon were gone.

Volka's father opened a few crates and said, "We'll do the rest in the evening." Then he left for the factory.

Mother and Grandma began unpacking the pots and pans, while Volka decided to run down to the river nearby. His father had warned him not to go swimming without him, because the river was very deep, but Volka soon found an excuse: "I have to go in for a dip to clear my head. How can I take an exam with a fuzzy brain!"

It's wonderful, the way Volka was always able to think of an excuse when he was about to do something he was not allowed to do.

How convenient it is to have a river near your house! Volka told his mother he'd go sit on the bank and study his geography.

And he really and truly intended to spend about ten minutes leafing through the text-book. However, he got undressed and jumped into the water the minute he reached the river. It was still early, and there was not a soul on the bank. This had its good and bad points. It was nice, because no one could stop him from swimming as much as he liked. It was bad, because there was no one to admire what a good swimmer and especially what an extraordinary diver he was.

Volka swam and dived until he became blue. Finally, he realized he had had enough. He was ready to climb out when he suddenly changed his mind and decided to dive into the clear water one last time.

As he was about to come up for air, his hand hit a long hard object on the bottom. He grabbed it and surfaced near the shore, holding a strange-looking slippery, moss-covered clay vessel. It resembled an ancient type of Greek vase called an amphora. The neck was sealed tightly with a green substance and what looked like a seal was imprinted on top.

Volka weighed the vessel in his hand. It was very heavy. He caught his breath.

A treasure! An ancient treasure of great scientific value! How wonderful!

He dressed quickly and dashed home to open it in the privacy of his room.

As he ran along, he could visualize the notice which would certainly appear in all the papers the next morning. He even thought of a heading: "A Pioneer Aids Science."

"Yesterday, a pioneer named Vladimir Kostylkov came to his district militia station and handed the officer on duty a treasure consisting of antique gold objects which he found on the bottom of the river, in a very deep place. The treasure has been handed over to the Historical Museum. According to reliable sources, Vladimir Kostylkov is an excellent diver."

Volka slipped by the kitchen, where his mother was cooking dinner. He

dashed into his room, nearly breaking his leg as he stumbled on a chandelier lying on the floor. It was Grandma's famous chandelier. Very long ago, before the Revolution, his deceased grandfather had converted it from a hanging oil lamp. Grandma would not part with it for anything in the world, because it was a treasured memory of Grandfather. Since it was not elegant enough to be hung in the dining room, they decided to hang it in Volka's room. That is why a huge iron hook had been screwed into the ceiling.

Volka rubbed his sore knee, locked the door, took his penknife from his pocket and, trembling from excitement, scraped the seal off the bottle.

The room immediately filled with choking black smoke, while a noiseless explosion of great force threw him up to the ceiling, where he remained suspended from the hook by the seat of his pants.

THE OLD GENIE

While Volka was swaying back and forth on the hook, trying to understand what had happened, the smoke began to clear. Suddenly, he realized there was someone else in the room besides himself. It was a skinny, sunburnt old man with a beard down to his waist and dressed in an elegant turban, a white coat of fine wool richly embroidered in silver and gold, gleaming white silk puffed trousers and petal pink morocco slippers with upturned toes.

"Hachoo!" the old man sneezed loudly and prostrated himself. "I greet you, O Wonderful and Wise Youth!"

Volka shut his eyes tight and then opened them again. No, he was not seeing things. The amazing old man was still there. Kneeling and rubbing his hands, he stared at the furnishings of Volka's room with lively, shrewd eyes, as if it were all goodness-knows what sort of a miracle.

"Where did you come from?" Volka inquired cautiously, swaying back and forth under the ceiling like a pendulum. "Are you... from an amateur troupe?"

"Oh, no, my young lord," the old man replied grandly, though he remained in the same uncomfortable pose and continued to sneeze. "I am not from the strange country of Anamateur Troupe you mentioned. I come from this most horrible vessel."

With these words he scrambled to his feet and began jumping on the vessel, from which a wisp of smoke was still curling upward, until there was nothing left but a small pile of clay chips. Then, with a sound like tinkling crystalware, he yanked a hair from his beard and tore it in two. The bits of clay flared up with a weird green flame until soon there was not

a trace of them left on the floor.

Still, Volka was dubious. You must agree, it's not easy to accept the fact that a live person can crawl out of a vessel no bigger than a decanter.

"Well, I don't know..." Volka stammered. "The vessel was so small, and you're so big compared to it."

"You don't believe me, O despicable one?!" the old man shouted angrily, but immediately calmed down; once again he fell to his knees, hitting the floor with his forehead so strongly that the water shook in the aquarium and the sleepy fish began to dart back and forth anxiously. "Forgive me, my young saviour, but I am not used to having my words doubted. Know ye, most blessed of all young men, that I am none other than the mighty Genie Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab-that is, the son of Hottab, famed in all four corners of the world."

All this was so interesting it made Volka forget he was hanging under the ceiling on a chandelier hook.

"A 'gin-e'? Isn't that some kind of a drink?"

"I am not a drink, O inquisitive youth!" the old man flared up again, then took himself in hand once more and calmed down. "I am not a beverage, but a mighty, unconquerable spirit. There is no magic in the world which I cannot do, and my name, as I have already had the pleasure of conveying to your great and extremely respected attention, is Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab, or, as you would say in Russian, Hassan Abdurrakhman Hottabych. If you mention it to the first Ifrit or Genie you meet, you'll see him tremble, and his mouth will go dry from fear," the old man continued boastfully.

"My story- hachoo!- is strange, indeed. And if it were written with needles in the corners of the eyes, it would be a good lesson for all those who seek learning. I, most unfortunate Genie that I am, disobeyed Sulayman, son of David (on the twain be peace!)-I, and my brother, Omar Asaf Hottabych. Then Sulayman sent his Vizier Asaf, son of Barakhiya, to seize us, and he brought us back against our will. Sulayman, David's son (on the twain be peace!), ordered two bottles brought to him: a copper one and a clay one. He put me in the clay vessel and my brother Omar Hottabych in the copper one. He sealed both vessels and imprinted the greatest of all names of Allah on them and then ordered his Genies to carry us off and throw my brother into the sea and me into the river, from which you, O my blessed saviour- hachoo, hachoo!-have fished me. May your days be prolonged. O.... Begging your pardon, I would be indescribably happy to know your name, most beautiful of all youths."

"My name's Volka," our hero replied as he swayed softly to and fro under the ceiling.

"And what is your fortunate father's name, may he be blessed for eternity? Tell me the most gentle of all his names, as he is certainly

deserving of great love and gratitude for presenting the world with such an outstanding offspring."

"His name's Alexei. And his most gentle ... most gentle name is Alyosha."

"Then know ye, most deserving of all youths, the star of my heart, Volka ibn Alyosha, that I will henceforth fulfil all your wishes, since you have saved me from the most horrible imprisonment. Hachoo!"

"Why do you keep on sneezing so?" Volka asked, as though everything else was quite clear.

"The many thousand years I spent in dampness, deprived of the beneficial rays of the sun, in a cold vessel lying on the bottom of a river, have given me, your undeserving servant, a most tiresome running nose. Hachoo! Hachoo! But all this is of no importance at all and unworthy of your most treasured attention. Order me as you wish, O young master!" Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab concluded heatedly with his head raised, but still kneeling.

"First of all, won't you please rise," Volka said.

"Your every word is my command," the old man replied obediently and rose. "I await your further orders."

"And now," Volka mumbled uncertainly, "if it's not too much trouble .. would you be kind enough ... of course, if it's not too much trouble.... What I mean is, I'd really like to be back on the floor again."

That very moment he found himself standing beside old man Hottabych, as we shall call our new acquaintance for short. The first thing Volka did was to grab the seat of his pants. There was no hole at all.

Miracles were beginning to happen.

THE GEOGRAPHY EXAMINATION

"Order me as you wish!" Hottabych continued, gazing at Volka devotedly. "Is there anything that grieves you, O Volka ibn Alyosha? Tell me, and I will help you."

"My goodness!" Volka cried, glancing at the clock ticking away loudly on the table. "I'm late! I'm late for my exam!"

"What are you late for, O most treasured Volka ibn Alyosha?" Hottabych asked in a business-like way. "What does that strange word 'ex-am' mean?"

"It's the same as a test. I'm late for my test at school."

"Then know ye, O Volka, that you do not value my powers at all," the old man said in a hurt voice. "No, no, and no again! You will not be late for your exam. Just tell me what your choice is:

to hold up the exam, or to find yourself immediately at your school gates?"

"To find myself at the gates," Volka replied.

"Nothing could be simpler! You will now find yourself where your young and honourable spirit draws you so impatiently. You will stun your teachers and your comrades with your great knowledge."

With the same pleasant tinkling sound the old man once again pulled a hair from his beard; then a second one.

"I'm afraid I won't stun them," Volka sighed, quickly changing into his school uniform. "To tell you the truth, I have little chance of getting an 'A' in geography."

"In geography?" the old man cried and raised his thin hairy arms triumphantly. "So you're to take an exam in geography?! Then know ye, O most wonderful of all wonderful ones, that you are exceptionally lucky, for I know more about geography than any other Genie-I, your devoted Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab. We shall go to school together, may its foundation and roof be blessed! I'll prompt you invisibly and tell you all the answers. You will become the most famous pupil of your school and of all the schools of your most beautiful city. And if anyone of your teachers does not accord you the greatest praise, he will have to deal with me! Oh, they will be very, very sorry!" Hottabych raged. "I'll turn them into mules that carry water, into homeless curs covered with scabs, into the most horrible and obnoxious toads-that's what I'll do to them! However," he said, calming down as quickly as he had become enraged, "things will not go that far, for everyone, O Volka ibn Alyosha, will be astounded by your answers."

"Thank you, Hassan Hottabych," Volka sighed miserably. "Thank you, but I don't want you to prompt me. We pioneers are against prompting as a matter of principle. We're conducting an organized fight against prompting."

Now, how could an old Genie who had spent so many years in prison know such a scholarly term as "a matter of principle"? However, the sigh his young saviour heaved to accompany his sad and honourable words convinced Hottabych that Volka ibn Alyosha needed his help more than ever before.

"Your refusal grieves me," Hottabych said. "After all, no one will notice me prompting you."

"Ha!" Volka said bitterly. "You don't know what keen ears our teacher Varvara Stepanovna has."

"You not only upset me, you now offend me, O Volka ibn Alyosha! If Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab says that no one will notice, it means no one will notice!"

"Not a single soul?" Volka asked again, just to make sure.

"Not a single soul. The words which I will have the pleasure of telling you will go straight from my deferential lips to your greatly respected

ears."

"I really don't know what to do, Hassan Hottabych," Volka said sighing, as though with reluctance. "I really hate to upset you by refusing. All right, have your own way! Geography isn't Math or Grammar. I'd never agree to even the tiniest prompt in those subjects, but since geography isn't really the most important subject.... Come on, let's hurry!" He looked at the old man's unusual clothing with a critical eye. "Hm-m-m.... D'you think you could change into something else, Hassan Hottabych?"

"Don't my garments please your gaze, O most noble of Volkas?" Hottabych asked unhappily.

"Sure they do, they certainly do," Volka answered diplomatically. "But you're dressed ... if you know what I mean.... Our styles are a little bit different.... Your clothes will attract too much attention."

"But how do respectable, honourable gentlemen of advanced age dress nowadays?"

Volka tried to explain what a jacket, trousers and a hat were, but though he tried very hard, he wasn't very successful. He was about to despair, when he suddenly glanced at his grandfather's portrait on the wall. He led Hottabych over to the time-darkened photograph and the old man gazed long at it with curiosity, surprised to see clothing so unlike his own.

A moment later, Volka, holding Hottabych's arm, emerged from the house. The old man was magnificent in a new linen suit, an embroidered Ukrainian shirt, and a straw boater. The only things he had refused to change, complaining of three thousand-year-old corns, were his slippers. He remained in his pink slippers with the upturned toes, which, in times gone by, would have probably driven the most stylish young man at the Court of Caliph Harun al Rashid out of his mind with envy.

When Volka and a transformed Hottabych approached the entrance of Moscow Secondary School No. 245 the old man looked at himself coyly in the glass door and remained quite pleased with what he saw.

The elderly doorman, who was sedately reading his paper, put it aside with pleasure at the sight of Volka and his companion. It was hot and the doorman felt like talking to someone.

Skipping several steps at a time, Volka dashed upstairs. The corridors were quiet and empty, a true and sad sign that the examination had begun and that he was late.

"And where are you going?" the doorman asked Hottabych good-naturedly as he was about to follow his young friend in.

"He's come to see the principal," Volka shouted from the top 'of the stairs.

"You won't be able to see him now. He's at an examination. Won't you please come by again later on in the day?"

Hottabych frowned angrily.

"If I be permitted to, O respected old man, I would prefer to wait for him here." Then he shouted to Volka, "Hurry to your classroom, O Volka ibn Alyosha! I'm certain that you'll astound your teachers and your comrades with your great knowledge!"

"Are you his grandfather or something?" the doorman inquired, trying to start up a conversation. Hottabych said nothing. He felt it beneath his dignity to converse with a doorkeeper.

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" the doorman continued. "The heat's something terrible today."

He poured a full cup of tea and, turning to hand it to the untalkative stranger, he saw to his horror that the old man had disappeared into thin air. Shaken by this impossible occurrence, the doorman gulped down the tea intended for Hottabych, poured himself a second cup, and then a third, and did not stop until there wasn't a drop left. Then he sank into his chair and began to fan himself exhaustedly with his newspaper.

All the while, a no less unusual scene was taking place on the second floor, right above the doorman, in the classroom of 6B. The teachers, headed by the principal, Pavel Vasilyevich, sat at a table covered with a heavy cloth used for special occasions. Behind them was the blackboard, hung with various maps. Facing them were rows of solemn pupils. It was so quiet in the room that one could hear a lonely fly buzzing monotonously near the ceiling. If the pupils of 6B were always this quiet, theirs would undoubtedly be the most disciplined class in all of Moscow.

It must be noted, however, that the quiet in the classroom was not only due to the hush accompanying any examination, but also to the fact that Volka Kostylkov had been called to the board-and he was not in the room.

"Vladimir Kostylkov!" the principal repeated and looked at the quiet children in surprise.

It became still more quiet.

Then, suddenly, they heard the loud clatter of running feet in the hall outside, and at the very moment the principal called "Vladimir Kostylkov" for the third and last time, the door burst open and Volka, very much out of breath, gasped:

"Here!"

"Please come up to the board," the principal said dryly. "We'll speak about your being late afterwards."

"I ... I feel ill," Volka mumbled, saying the first thing that came to his head, as he walked uncertainly towards his examiners.

While he was wondering which of the slips of paper laid out on the table he should choose, old man Hottabych slipped through the wall in the corridor and disappeared through the opposite one into an adjoining

classroom. He had an absorbed look on his face.

Volka finally took the first slip his hand touched. Tempting his fate, he turned it over very slowly, but was pleasantly surprised to see that he was to speak on India. He knew quite a lot about India, since he had always been interested in that country.

"Well, let's hear what you have to say," the principal said.

Volka even remembered the beginning of the chapter on India word for word as it was in his book. He opened his mouth to say that the Hindustan Peninsula resembled a triangle and that this triangle bordered on the Indian Ocean and its various parts: the Arabian Sea in the West and the Bay of Bengal in the East, that two large countries-India and Pakistan-were located on the peninsula, that both were inhabited by kindly and peace-loving peoples with rich and ancient cultures, etc., etc., etc., but just then Hottabych, standing in the adjoining classroom, leaned against the wall and began mumbling diligently, cupping his hand to his mouth like a horn:

"India, O my most respected teacher...!"

And suddenly Volka, contrary to his own desires, began to pour forth the most atrocious nonsense:

"India, O my most respected teacher, is located close to the edge of the Earth's disc and is separated from this edge by desolate and unexplored deserts, as neither animals nor birds live to the east of it. India is a very wealthy country, and its wealth lies in its gold. This is not dug from the ground as in other countries, but is produced, day and night, by a tireless species of gold-bearing ants, which are nearly the size of a dog. They dig their tunnels in the ground and three times a day they bring up gold sand and nuggets and pile them in huge heaps. But woe be to those Indians who try to steal this gold without due skill! The ants pursue them and, overtaking them, kill them on the spot. From the north and west, India borders on a country of bald people. The men and women and even the children are all bald in this country. And these strange people live on raw fish and pine cones. Still closer to them is a country where you can neither see anything nor pass, as it is filled to the top with feathers. The earth and the air are filled with feathers, and that is why you can't see anything there."

"Wait a minute, Kostylkov," the geography teacher said with a smile.

"No one has asked you to tell us of the ancients' views on Asia's geography. We'd like you to tell us the modern, scientific facts about India."

Oh, how happy Volka would have been to display his knowledge of the subject! But what could he do if he was no longer the master of his speech and actions! In agreeing to have Hottabych prompt him, he became a toy in the old man's well-meaning but ignorant hands. He wanted to tell his teachers that what he had told them obviously had nothing to do with modern

science. But Hottabych on the other side of the wall shrugged in dismay and shook his head, and Volka, standing in front of the class, was compelled to do the same.

"That which I have had the honour of telling you, O greatly respected Varvara Stepanovna, is based on the most reliable sources, and there exist no other, more scientific facts on India than those I have just, with your permission, revealed to you."

"Please keep to the subject. This is an examination, not a masquerade. If you don't know the answers, it would be much more honourable to admit it right away. What was it you said about the Earth's disc by the way? Don't you know that the Earth is round?"

Did Volka Kostylkov, an active member of the Moscow Planetarium's Astronomy Club, know that the Earth was round? Why, any first-grader knew that. But Hottabych, standing behind the wall, burst out laughing, and no matter how our poor boy tried to press his lips together, a haughty smirk escaped him:

"I presume you are making fun of your most devoted pupil! If the Earth were round, the water would run off it, and then everyone would die of thirst and all the plants would dry up. The Earth, O most noble and honoured of all teachers and pedagogues, has always had and does now have the shape of a flat disc, surrounded on all sides by a mighty river named 'Ocean.' The Earth rests on six elephants, and they, in turn, are standing on a tremendous turtle. That is how the world is made, O teacher!"

The board of teachers gazed at Volka with rising surprise. He broke out in a cold sweat from horror and the realization of his own complete helplessness. The other children could not quite understand what had happened to their friend, but some began to giggle. It was really funny to hear about a country of bald people, about a country filled with feathers, about gold-bearing ants as big as dogs and about the flat Earth resting on six elephants and a turtle. As for Zhenya Bogorad, Volka's best friend and one of the class pioneer leaders, he became really worried. He knew that Volka, as chairman of the Astronomy Club, at least knew that the Earth was round-if he knew nothing else. Could it be that he had suddenly decided upon some mischief, and during an examination, of all times! Volka was probably ill, but what ailed him? What kind of a strange, unusual disease did he have? And then, it was very bad for their pioneer group. So far, they had been first in all the exams, but now Volka's stupid answers would spoil everything, though he was usually a disciplined pioneer! Goga Pilukin, a most unpleasant boy at the next desk (nicknamed "Pill" by his classmates), hastened to pour salt on Zhenya's fresh wounds.

"That takes care of your group, Zhenya dear," he whispered with a malicious giggle. "You're sinking fast!" Zhenya shook his fist at Pill.

"Varvara Stepanovna!" Goga whined. "Bogorad just shook his fist at me."

"Sit still and don't tattle," Varvara Stepanovna said and turned back to Volka, who stood before her more dead than alive. "Were you serious about the elephants and the turtle?" "More serious than ever before, O most respected of all teachers," Volka repeated after the old man and felt himself burning up with shame.

"And haven't you anything else to add? Do you really think you were answering the question?"

"No, I've nothing to add," Hottabych said behind the wall, shaking his head.

And Volka, helpless to withstand the force that was pushing him towards failure, also shook his head and said, "No, I've nothing to add. Perhaps, however, the fact that in the wealthy land of India the horizons are framed by gold and pearls."

"It's incredible!" his teacher exclaimed.

It was difficult to believe that Kostylkov, a usually disciplined boy, had suddenly decided to play a silly joke on his teachers (and at such an important time!), running the risk of a second examination in the autumn.

"I don't think the boy is quite well," Varvara Stepanovna whispered to the principal.

Glancing hurriedly and sympathetically at Volka, who stood numb with grief before them, the committee held a whispered conference.

Varvara Stepanovna suggested, "What if we ask the child another question, just to calm him? Say, from last year's book. Last year he got an 'A' in geography."

The others agreed, and Varvara Stepanovna once again turned to the unhappy boy.

"Now, Kostylkov, wipe your tears and don't be nervous. Tell us what a horizon is."

"A horizon?" Volka said with new hope. "That's easy. A horizon is an imagined line which...."

But Hottabych came to life behind the wall again and Volka once again became the victim of prompting.

"The horizon, O my most revered one," Volka corrected himself, "I would call the horizon that brink, where the crystal cupola of the Heavens touches the edge of the Earth."

"It gets worse as he goes on," Varvara Stepanovna moaned. "How would you have us understand your words about the crystal cupola of the Heavens-literally or figuratively?"

"Literally, O teacher," Hottabych prompted from the next room.

And Volka was obliged to repeat after him, "Literally, O teacher."

"Figuratively!" someone hissed from the back of the room. But Volka

repeated, "Naturally, in the literal sense and no other."

"What does that mean?" Varvara Stepanovna asked, still not believing her ears. "Does that mean you consider the sky to be a solid cupola?"

"Yes."

"And does it mean there's a place where the Earth ends?"

"Yes, there is, O my most highly respected teacher."

Behind the wall Hottabych nodded approvingly and rubbed his hands together smugly.

A strange silence fell on the class. Even those who were always ready to laugh stopped smiling. Something was definitely wrong with Volka. Varvara Stepanovna rose and felt his forehead anxiously. He did not have a fever.

But Hottabych was really touched by this. He bowed low and touched his forehead and chest in the Eastern manner and then began to whisper. Volka, driven by the same awful force, repeated his movements exactly.

"I thank you, O most gracious daughter of Stepan! I thank you for your trouble. But it is unnecessary, because, praised be Allah, I am quite well."

All this sounded extremely strange and funny. However, the other children were so worried about Volka that not a shade of a smile crossed a single face. Varvara Stepanovna took him by the hand, led him out of the room, and patted his lowered head.

"Never mind, Kostylkov. Don't worry. You're probably overtired. Come back when you've had a good rest. All right?"

"All right," Volka said. "But upon my word of honour, Varvara Stepanovna, it's not my fault! It isn't really!"

"Why, I'm not blaming you at all," the teacher answered kindly. "I'll tell you what: let's drop in on Pyotr Ivanych."

Pyotr Ivanych, the school doctor, examined Volka for all of ten minutes. He made him close his eyes and hold his arms out before him with his fingers spread apart; then he tapped his knee and drew lines on his chest and back with his stethoscope.

By then Volka came to himself. His cheeks turned pink again and his spirits rose.

"The boy's perfectly well," said Pyotr Ivanych. "And if you want my opinion, he's an unusually healthy child! I think he was probably overworked. He must have studied too much before his exams, because there's nothing wrong with him. And that's all there is to it!"

Just in case, though, he measured some drops into a glass, and the unusually healthy child was forced to drink the medicine.

Suddenly, Volka had an idea. What if he could profit from Hottabych's absence and take his geography examination right there, in the doctor's office?

"By no means!" Pyotr Ivanych said emphatically. "By no means. Let the

child have a few days of rest. Geography can wait."

"That's quite true," the teacher sighed with relief, pleased that everything had turned out so well in the end. "And you, my young friend, run along home and have a good rest. When you feel better, come back and take your exam. I'm positive you'll get an 'A.' What do you think, Pyotr Ivanych?"

"Such a Hercules as he? Why, he'll never get less than an 'A'+!"

"Ah ... and don't you think someone had better see him home?" Varvara Stepanovna added.

"Oh no, Varvara Stepanovna!" Volka cried. "I'll make out fine."

All he needed now was for a chaperone to bump into that crazy old Hottabych!

Volka appeared to be in the pink of health, and with an easy heart Varvara Stepanovna let him go home.

The doorman rushed towards him as he was on the way out. "Kostylkov! Your grandpa, or whoever he is, the one who came here with you...."

At that very moment, old man Hottabych appeared from the wall. He was as happy as a lark and immensely pleased with himself, and he was humming a little tune.

"Help!" the doorman cried soundlessly and tried in vain to pour himself another cup of tea from the empty kettle. When he put the kettle down and turned around, both Volka Kostylkov and his mysterious companion had disappeared. By then they had already turned the nearest corner.

"Pray tell me, young master, did you astound your teacher and your comrades with your great knowledge?" Hottabych inquired proudly, breaking a rather long silence.

"I astounded them all right!" Volka said and looked at the old man with loathing.

Hottabych beamed. "I expected nothing else! But for a moment there I thought that the most revered daughter of Stepan was displeased with the breadth and scope of your knowledge."

"Oh, no, no!" Volka cried in fear, recalling Hottabych's terrible threats. "You were imagining things."

"I would have changed her into a chopping block on which butchers chop up mutton," the old man said fiercely (and Volka was really frightened for his teacher's fate), "if I hadn't seen that she had such great respect for you and took you to the door of your classroom and then practically down the stairs. I realized then that she had fully appreciated your answers. Peace be with her!"

"Sure, peace be with her!" Volka added hastily, feeling that a load had fallen from his shoulders.

During the several thousand years of Hottabych's life, he had often had

to do with people feeling sad and gloomy, and he knew how to cheer them up. At any rate, he was convinced he knew how to do so. All that was needed was to give a person that which he had always longed for. But what kind of a present should he give Volka? The answer came to him quite by chance when Volka asked a passer-by:

"Would you please tell me what time it is?"

The man looked at his watch and said, "Five to two."

"Thank you," Volka said and continued on in silence.

Hottabych was the first to speak.

"Tell me, O Volka, how was the man able to tell the time of day so accurately?"

"Didn't you see him look at his watch?" The old man raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"His watch?!" "Sure, his watch," Volka explained. "He had a watch on his

wrist. The round chrome-plated thing."

"Why don't you have such a watch, O most noble of all Genie-saviours?"

"I'm too young to have such a watch," Volka answered humbly.

"May I be permitted, O honourable passer-by, to inquire as to the time of day?" Hottabych said, stopping the first person he saw and staring at his watch.

"Two minutes to two," the man answered, somewhat surprised at the flowery language.

Thanking him in the most elaborate oriental manner, Hottabych said with a sly grin:

"May I be permitted, O loveliest of all Volkas, to inquire as to the time of day?"

And there was a watch shining on Volka's left wrist, exactly like the one the man they had stopped had, but instead of being chrome-plated, it was of the purest gold.

"May it be worthy of your hand and your kind heart," Hottabych said in a touched voice, basking in Volka's happiness and surprise.

Then Volka did something that any other boy or girl would have done in his place, having found themselves the proud possessors of their first watch. He raised his arm to his ear to hear it tick.

"O-o-o-o," he drawled. "It's not wound. I'll have to wind it." To his great disappointment, he found he could not move the winding button. Then he got out his pen-knife to open the watch case. However, try as he would, he could not find a trace of a slit in which to insert the knife.

"It's made of solid gold," the old man boasted and winked. "I'm not one of those people who give presents made of hollow gold."

"Does that mean there's nothing inside of it?" Volka asked with

disappointment.

"Why, should there be anything inside?" the old Genie inquired anxiously. Volka unbuckled the strap in silence and returned the watch to Hottabych.

"All right, then, I'll give you a watch that doesn't have to have anything inside."

Once again a gold watch appeared on Volka's wrist, but now it was very small and flat. There was no glass on it and instead of hands there was a small vertical gold rod in the middle. The face was studded with the most exquisite emeralds set where the numbers should be.

"Never before did anyone, even the wealthiest of all sultans, have a hand sun watch!" the old man boasted again. "There were sun dials in city squares, in market places, in gardens and in yards. And they were all made of stone. But I just invented this one. It's not bad, is it?"

It certainly was exciting to be the only owner of a sun watch in the whole world.

Volka grinned broadly, while the old man beamed.

"How do you tell the time on it?" Volka asked.

"Here's how," Hottabych said, taking hold of Volka's hand gently. "Hold your arm straight out like this and the shadow cast by the little gold rod will fall on the right number."

"But the sun has to be shining," Volka said, looking with displeasure at a small cloud that just obscured it.

"The cloud will pass in a minute," Hottabych promised. True enough, in a minute the sun began to shine once again. "See, it points somewhere between 2 and 3 p.m. That means it's about 2:30." As he was speaking, another cloud covered the sun.

"Don't pay any attention to it," Hottabych said. "I'll clear the sky for you whenever you want to find out what time it is."

"What about the autumn?" Volka asked.

"What about it?"

"What about the autumn and the winter, when the sky is covered with clouds for months on end?"

"I've already told you, O Volka, the sun will shine whenever you want it to. You have but to order me and everything will be as you wish."

"But what if you're not around?"

"I'll always be near-by. All you have to do is call me."

"But what about the evenings and nights?" Volka asked maliciously. "What about the night, when there's no sun in the sky?"

"At night people must surrender themselves to sleep, and not look at their watches," Hottabych snapped. He had to control himself not to teach the insolent youth a good lesson. "All right then, tell me whether you like

that man's watch. If you do, you shall have it."

"What do you mean? It belongs to him. Don't tell me you are going to...."

"Don't worry, O Volka ibn Alyosha. I won't touch a hair on his head. He'll offer you the watch himself, for you are certainly worthy of receiving the most treasured gifts."

"You'll force him to and then he'll...."

"And he'll be overjoyed that I did not wipe him off the face of the Earth, or change him into a foul rat, or a cockroach hiding in a crack of a hovel, or the last beggar...."

"That's real blackmail," Volka said angrily. "Tricks like that send a man to jail, my friend. And you'll well deserve it."

"Send me to jail?!" the old man flared up. "Me?! Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab? And does he know, that most despicable of all passers-by, who I am? Ask the first Genie, or Ifrit, or Shaitan you see, and they'll tell you, as they tremble from fear, that Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab is the chief of all Genie bodyguards. My army consists of 72 tribes, with 72,000 warriors in each tribe; every warrior rules over one thousand Marids and every Marid rules over a thousand Aides and every Aide rules over a thousand Shaitans and every Shaitan rules over a thousand Genies. I rule over them all and none can disobey me! If only this thrice-miserable of all most miserable passers-by tries to...."

Meanwhile, the man in question was strolling down the street, glancing at the shop windows, and in no way aware of the terrible danger hanging over him because of an ordinary watch glittering on his wrist.

"Why, I'll..." Hottabych raged on in his boastfulness, "why, if you only so desire, I'll turn him into a...."

Each second counted. Volka shouted:

"Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Don't touch that man! I don't need a watch! I don't need anything!"

"Nothing at all?" the old man asked doubtfully, quickly calming down. The only sun watch in the world disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

"Nothing at all," said Volka. He heaved such a sigh that Hottabych realized he must apply himself to cheering up his young saviour and dispelling his gloomy thoughts.

HOTTABYCH'S SECOND SERVICE

Volka was in the dumps. Hottabych sensed that something was wrong. He never dreamed he had done the boy such a bad turn during the exam, but it was all too clear that Volka was upset. And the one to blame, apparently,

was none other than himself, Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab.

"Would you, O moon-like, feel inclined to listen to stories of most unusual and strange adventures?" he asked slyly. "For instance, do you know the story of the Baghdad barber's three black roosters and his lame son? Or the one about the copper camel with a silver hump? Or about the water-carrier Ahmet and his magic pail?"

Volka kept on frowning. This did not stop the old man, and he began hurriedly:

"Be it known to you, O most wonderful of all secondary school pupils, that once upon a time in Baghdad there lived a skilled barber named Selim who had three roosters and a lame son named Tub. It so happened that Caliph Harun al Rashid once passed his shop. But, O most attentive of all youths, I suggest we sit down on this bench in order that your young legs don't tire during this long and most educational story."

Volka agreed. They sat down in the shade of an old linden tree.

For three long hours Hottabych went on and on with the truly interesting story. He finally ended it with these crafty words:

"But more marvellous still is the story of the copper camel with a silver hump," and immediately proceeded with it. When he came to the part: "Then the stranger took a piece of coal from the brazier and drew the outline of a camel on the wall. The camel waved its tail, nodded its head, walked off the wall and onto the cobblestones.. ." -he stopped to enjoy the impression his story of a drawing coming to life had made on his young listener.

But Hottabych was in for some disappointment, because Volka had seen enough cartoons in his life. However, the old man's words gave him an idea.

"You know what? Let's go to the movies. You can finish the story after."

"Your every word is my command, O Volka ibn Alyosha," the old man replied obediently. "But do me a favour and tell me what you mean by 'the movies'? Is it a bath-house? Or, perhaps, that's what you call the market-place, where one can stroll and chat with friends and acquaintances?"

"Well! Any child can tell you what a movie is. It's a...." At this, Volka waved his hands around vaguely and added, "Well, anyway, you'll see when we get there."

Over the Saturn Theatre box-office was a sign that read:

"Children under sixteen not admitted to evening performances."

"What's the matter, O most handsome of all handsome youths?" Hottabych inquired anxiously, noticing that Volka had become gloomy again.

"Nothing much. It's just that we're late for the last day-time

performance! You have to be sixteen to get in now. I really don't know what to do, 'cause I don't feel like going home."

"You won't go home!" Hottabych cried. "In a twinkling of an eye they'll let us through, surrounded by the respect your truly endless capabilities command! I'll just have a peek at those bits of paper everyone's handing that stern-looking woman at the entrance."

"That old braggart!" Volka thought irritably. Suddenly, he felt two tickets in his right fist.

"Come!" Hottabych called, beaming again. "Come, they'll let you through now!"

"Are you sure?"

"Just as positive as that a great future awaits you!"

He nudged Volka towards a mirror hanging nearby. A boy with a bushy blond beard on his healthy freckled face looked back from the mirror at a shocked and gaping Volka.

AN UNUSUAL EVENT AT THE MOVIES

A triumphant Hottabych dragged Volka up the stairs to the second-floor foyer. At the entrance to the projection room stood Zhenya Bogorad, the envy of every pupil of 6B. This darling of fate was the theatre manager's nephew and therefore permitted to attend evening performances. But today, instead of being the happiest of boys, he was suffering terribly. He was suffering from loneliness. He was dying to have a companion, someone he could talk to about Volka Kostylkov's behaviour at the morning's geography examination. Alas! There was not a familiar face in sight.

He then decided to go downstairs, in the hope that Luck would send him someone. At the landing he was nearly knocked off his feet by an old man in a white suit and embroidered morocco slippers who was dragging along-whom do you think?- Volka Kostylkov, in person! For reasons unknown, Volka was covering his face with his hands.

"Volka!" Bogorad shouted happily. "Kostylkov!"

Unlike Zhenya, Volka did not seem at all pleased at the encounter. In fact, he even pretended not to have recognized his best friend. He darted into the thick of the crowd which stood listening to an orchestra while awaiting the next showing.

"Don't think I care!" Zhenya said in an offended tone and went off to buy an ice-cream.

That is why he didn't see the people gathering round the strange old man and Volka. Later, when he tried to push his way through to the spot

which was attracting so many eager eyes, his friend was already surrounded by a rapidly-growing crowd. He could hear the folding seats hitting against the backs of the chairs as those who were listening to the orchestra rushed off. Soon the musicians were playing to rows of empty seats.

"What happened?" Zhenya asked, vainly trying to elbow his way through. "If there's been an accident, I can phone for help. My uncle's the manager here. What's the matter?"

But no one seemed to know what the matter was. And, since hardly anyone could see anything and everyone wanted to know what was going on inside the circle, they all kept asking each other questions and demanding sensible answers, until they raised such a ruckus they began to drown out the music, though the musicians were playing as loud as they could.

Zhenya's uncle finally appeared, climbed on a chair and shouted, "Everyone please disperse! What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a bearded child before?"

The moment these words reached the snack bar, everyone there rushed to see the bearded child.

"Volka!" Zhenya yelled at the top of his voice, despairing of ever getting through the crowd. "I can't see anything! Can you see? Does he have a big beard?"

"Golly!" the unfortunate Volka wailed. "What if he...."

"Poor child!" the curious onlookers sighed.

"What a pity!"

"Is science helpless in his case?"

At first, Hottabych misunderstood the attention his young friend was attracting. He thought the people were crowding round to express their respect for Volka. Then he began to get angry.

"Disperse, my good people!" he shouted, drowning out the noise of the crowd and the band. "Disperse, or I'll do something terrible to all of you!"

A timid girl gasped from fear, but the others only laughed. Really now, what was there to fear from such a funny old man in silly pink slippers? Why, if someone as much as touched him, he'd probably fall to pieces!

No, no one took his threats seriously. However, the old man was used to having people tremble at his words. He felt that he and Volka were being insulted and was becoming more and more enraged. There is no telling how it all could have ended, if the first bell had not rung just then.

The doors to the projection room were thrown open and everyone rushed to take their seats. Zhenya thought this was his chance to get a peek at the weird boy. But the same crowd that had blocked his view now caught him up and carried him into the projection room.

No sooner had he found a seat in the first row than the lights went out.

"Whew!" Zhenya breathed. "Just in time. I'll still be able to see the bearded boy on the way out." Nonetheless, he kept fidgeting in his seat, trying to catch a glimpse of the freak who was sitting somewhere behind him.

"Stop fidgeting! You're bothering us!" the man next to him said. "Sit still!" However, to his utter amazement, the fidgety boy suddenly disappeared.

Volka and Hottabych were the last to enter the darkened projection room. To tell the truth, Volka was so upset he was ready to leave without seeing the film.

Hottabych pleaded:

"If you're so displeased with the beard I thought you'd appreciate, I'll free you of it the moment we find our seats. That's easy enough. Let's follow the others in, for I'm impatient to discover what a 'movie' is. It must indeed be something wonderful, if even grown men attend it on such a hot summer day!"

When they were seated, Hottabych snapped the fingers of his left hand. Contrary to his promises, nothing happened to Volka's beard.

"Why is it taking you so long? Remember how you boasted!"

"I wasn't boasting, O most wonderful of 6B pupils. Fortunately, I changed my mind in time. If you don't have a beard, you'll be turned out of the movie which is so dear to your heart."

It soon became clear that this was merely a cunning excuse. Volka was not yet aware of the old man's craftiness.

"That's all right, they won't turn me out of here," he said.

Hottabych pretended not to have heard him. Volka repeated his words. Once again, Hottabych played deaf. Then Volka raised his voice:

"Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab!"

"I'm listening, O my young master," the old man answered obediently.

"Sh-h-h!" someone hissed.

Volka continued in a whisper, bending close to his friend who suddenly looked very sad.

"Do something to make this stupid beard disappear immediately!"

"It's not a bit stupid," the old man whispered back. "It is a most grand and noble beard."

"This very second! Do you hear? This very second!"

"I hear and I obey," Hottabych muttered and began whispering again, snapping his fingers.

The hairy growth on Volka's face remained unchanged.

"Well?"

"One moment, O most blessed Volka ibn Alyosha," the old man replied, still whispering and snapping his fingers nervously.

The beard on Volka's chin remained where it was.

"Look! Look who's sitting in the ninth row!" Volka whispered, forgetting his great misfortune for the moment.

As far as Hottabych could see, the two men in the ninth row appeared in no way remarkable.

"They're famous actors," Volka explained and told Hottabych their names, which, though they were very well known, meant nothing to him.

"Do you mean they're performers?" the old man asked condescendingly. "Are they tight-rope walkers?"

"They're movie actors! They're the most famous movie actors, that's who they are!"

"Then why aren't they doing anything? Why are they sitting back doing nothing?" Hottabych demanded critically. "They're probably very lazy performers. It pains me to see you praising them so thoughtlessly, O movie of my heart."

"Ha, ha!" Volka laughed. "Movie actors never act in a theatre. Movie actors act in studios."

"Does that mean we are going to see some others, and not movie actors, perform?"

"No, we'll see movie actors. Don't you understand, they act in a studio, but we see their acting here, in a theatre. Why, any child knows that."

"Pray forgive me, but what you're saying is a lot of nonsense," Hottabych reproached him sternly. "However, I'm not angry at you, because I don't think you meant to play a trick on your most obedient servant. You seem to be affected by the heat in this building. Unfortunately, I don't see a single window which could be opened to let in some fresh air."

Volka realized that in the few remaining minutes before the beginning of the film he would never be able to explain a movie actor's work to the old man. He decided to put off all explanations till later, and especially since he suddenly recalled his terrible misfortune.

"Dear, dear Hottabych, it's really no trouble to you-please, can't you do something right now?"

The old man heaved a sigh, yanked a hair from his beard, then a second, and a third, and, finally, in great anger, a whole bunch together. He began tearing them to bits savagely, muttering something with his eyes fixed on Volka's face. There was no change whatsoever. Then Hottabych began snapping his fingers in the most varied combinations: first two fingers at a time, then all five fingers of the right hand, then the left hand, then all ten fingers together, then once with the right and twice with the left, then the other way round-but all to no avail. Finally, he began ripping off his clothes.

"Are you mad?" Volka cried. "What're you doing?"

"Woe is me!" Hottabych replied in a whisper and began scratching his face. "Woe is me! The centuries I spent in that accursed vessel have-alas!-left their mark! A lack of practice has been extremely detrimental to my profession. Forgive me, O my young saviour, but I can do nothing with your beard! O woe is me, poor Genie Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab that I am!"

"What are you whispering?" Volka asked. "Say it louder, I can't make out a word."

And Hottabych replied, tearing at his clothes:

"O most treasured of youths, O most pleasing of all, do not vent your rightful anger upon me! I cannot rid you of your beard! I forgot how to do it!"

"Have a heart!" someone hissed. "You'll talk it all over at home. You're bothering us. Do you want me to call the usher?"

"Such disgrace has fallen upon my old head!" Hottabych whimpered. "To forget such simple magic! And who is it that forgot it? Me, Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab, the most powerful of all Genies-me, the very same Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab whom even Sulayman son of David (on the twain be peace!) could not subdue for twenty years!"

"Stop whining!" Volka whispered with unconcealed scorn. "Tell me honestly: how much longer will I have to go around with this beard?"

"Oh, calm your fears, my young master! Luckily, I only used small magic. In two days your face will be as smooth as that of a new-born babe. Perhaps I'll even remember how to break small magic spells before that."

Just then, the many credits which usually precede a film flashed off the screen and were replaced by people who moved and spoke. Hottabych whispered smugly:

"Hm! This is all quite clear. And very simple. All these people have appeared through the wall. You can't surprise me with that sort of stuff. I can do that myself."

"You don't understand a thing," Volka said with a smile, upon hearing such nonsense. "If you really want to know, films are based on the principle...."

There was hissing from all sides now, and Volka's explanations were cut short. For a moment Hottabych seemed entranced. Then he began squirming nervously, turning round ever so often to look at the ninth row and the two movie actors sitting there. He became convinced that they were sitting quietly behind him and, at the same time, galloping at top speed in front of him on the only lighted wall in this most mysterious building.

He became pale with fear. He raised his eyebrows and whispered, "Look behind us, O fearless Volka ibn Alyosha!"

"Sure, those are the actors. They play the leads and have come to see how the audience likes their acting."

"I don't like it!" Hottabych informed him quickly. "I don't like people to split in two. Even I don't know how to sit in a chair with my arms folded and gallop away as fast as the wind- and all at one and the same time! Even Sulayman, son of David (on the twain be peace!), could not do such a thing. And that's why I'm frightened."

"There's nothing to worry about," Volka said patronizingly. "Look at everyone else. See? No one's afraid. I'll explain what it's all about later."

Suddenly, the mighty roar of a locomotive cut through the stillness. Hottabych grabbed Volka's arm.

"O royal Volka!" he whispered, breaking out in a cold sweat. "I recognize that voice. It's the voice of Jirjis, the ruler of all Genies! Let's flee before it's too late!"

"What nonsense! Sit still! Nothing's threatening us."

"I hear and I obey," Hottabych mumbled obediently, though he continued to tremble.

But a split-second later, when a thundering locomotive seemed to be rushing off the screen and right into the audience, a scream of terror rent the projection room.

"Let's flee! Let's flee!" Hottabych shrieked as he dashed off.

At the exit he remembered about Volka and in several leaps returned, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him to the door.

"Let's flee, O Volka ibn Alyosha! Let's flee before it's too late!"

"Now, wait a minute. .." the usher began, appearing in front of them. However, she immediately did a long, graceful loop in the air and landed on the stage in front of the screen.

"What were you screeching about? What was all the panic about?" Volka asked angrily when they were out in the street again.

"How can I help shouting when the most terrifying of all dangers was threatening you! The great Jirjis, son of Rejmus, grandson of the Aunt of Ikrash, was heading straight for us, spitting fire and death!"

"What Jirjis? Which aunt? It was just an ordinary locomotive!"

"Has my young master decided to teach his old Genie Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab what a Shaitan is?" Hottabych asked acidly.

Volka realized that it would take much more than five minutes and much more than an hour to tell him what a movie and a locomotive were.

After Hottabych recovered his breath, he asked mildly, "What would you desire now, O treasured apple of my eye?"

"As if you didn't know. I want to get rid of my beard!"

"Alas," the old man sighed, "I am as yet helpless to fulfil your wish."

But perhaps you'd like something else instead? Just tell me, and you'll have it in a flash."

"I'd like to have a shave. And as quickly as possible." A few minutes later they entered a barbershop. Ten minutes later a tired barber stuck his head into the waiting room and shouted:

"Next!"

Then, from a corner near the coat-rack, rose a boy whose face was wrapped in an expensive silk scarf. He hurriedly sat down in the barber's chair.

"You want a hair-cut?" the barber asked. "No, a shave!" the boy answered in a hollow voice and removed the scarf that had covered most of his face.

A TROUBLED EVENING

It was a good thing Volka didn't have dark hair. Zhenya Bogorad, for instance, would certainly have had a blue shadow on his cheeks after having been shaved, but Volka's cheeks after he left the barbershop were no different from those of his friends. It was after seven, but it was still light outdoors and very hot. "Is there any place in your blessed city where they sell sherbets or cold drinks like sherbet and where we could quench our thirst?" Hottabych asked.

"Why, that's an idea! A glass of cold lemonade would really be grand."

Entering the first juice and mineral water shop they saw, they took a table.

"We'd like two bottles of lemonade, please," Volka said. The waitress nodded and headed towards the counter. Hottabych called her back angrily.

"You come right back, unworthy servant! I don't like the way you responded to the orders of my young friend and master."

"Hottabych, stop it! Do you hear! Stop..." Volka began to whisper.

But Hottabych covered the boy's mouth gently with his hand.

"At least don't interfere when I defend your honour, since your kind heart prevents you from scolding her yourself."

"You don't understand," Volka protested. He was really becoming frightened. "Hottabych, can't you see...."

Suddenly, he froze, for he felt he had lost the gift of speech. He wanted to throw himself between the old man and the still unsuspecting waitress, but found he could not move a finger.

It was all Hottabych's doing. To prevent Volka from interfering in something he considered a matter of honour, he had lightly pinched his ear

lobe between the first two fingers of his left hand and had thus condemned the boy to silence and immobility.

"How did you reply to the order my young master gave you?" he repeated.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," the waitress answered politely.

"It was not an order, it was a request, and I went to fulfil it. And, in the second place, it's customary to speak politely to strangers. All I can say is that I'm surprised you don't know such a thing, though every cultured person should."

"Don't tell me you want to teach me manners!" Hottabych shouted. "On your knees, or I'll turn you to dust!"

"Shame on you!" the cashier said. She was the only witness of the disgraceful scene, for there was no one besides Volka and Hottabych in the cafe. "How can you be so rude? And especially a person your age!"

"On your knees!" Hottabych roared. "And you get down on your knees, too," he added, pointing to the cashier. "And you!" he shouted to another waitress who was rushing to the rescue. "All three of you, get down on your knees immediately, and beg my young friend's pardon!" At this, Hottabych suddenly began to grow bigger and bigger until finally his head touched the ceiling. It was a strange and terrible sight. The cashier and the second waitress both fainted, but the first waitress only paled and said calmly, "Shame on you! You should behave properly in public. And if you're a decent sort of hypnotist..."

(She thought the old man was practising hypnotic tricks on them.)

"On your knees!" Hottabych bellowed. "Didn't you hear me- on your knees?!"

In all his three thousand seven hundred and thirty-two years, this was the first time ordinary mortals had refused to obey him. Hottabych felt the boy would lose respect for him, and he was terribly anxious to have Volka respect him and treasure his friendship.

"Down, O despicable one, if you value your life!"

"That's entirely out of the question," the brave waitress answered in a trembling voice. "I can't understand why you're raising your voice. If you think something's wrong, you can ask the cashier for the 'Complaints and Suggestions Book.' Anyone can have it. And I'd like to add that the most famous hypnotists and mesmerists visit our cafe, but none have ever behaved like you. Aren't I right, Katya?" she said, turning to her friend who had by then come to.

"How d'you like that!" Katya sniffled. "He wants us to get down on our knees! It's outrageous!"

"Is that so?!" Hottabych yelled, losing his temper completely. "Is that how insolent you are? Well, you have only yourselves to blame!"

With a practised gesture he yanked three hairs from his beard and let

go of Volka's ear to tear them to bits. To the old man's annoyance, Volka regained his power of speech and the freedom to move his limbs at will the moment he let go. The first thing he did was to grab Hottabych's hand and cry:

"Oh, no, Hottabych! What do you want to do?"

"I want to punish them, O Volka. I'm ashamed to admit I was about to strike them down with thunder. Something even the most worthless Ifrit can do!"

Despite the gravity of the situation, Volka felt he had to stand up for science.

"A clap of thunder cannot kill anyone," he said, thinking feverishly of how to ward off the danger now hanging over the poor waitresses. "What kills people is lightning-a charge of atmospheric electricity. Thunder is harmless, it's only a sound."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Hottabych answered dryly, not wishing to lower himself to an argument with such an inexperienced youth. "I don't think you're right. But I've changed my mind. I won't strike them with thunder, I'll change them into sparrows instead. Yes, that's the best thing to do."

"But why?"

"I must punish them, O Volka. Evil must always be punished."

"There's no reason to punish them! Do you hear!"

Volka tugged at Hottabych's hand, for the old man was about to tear the hairs, and then it would really be too late. But the hairs which he had knocked out of his hand miraculously returned to Hottabych's rough dark palm.

"Just you try!" Volka shouted, seeing that the old man was about to tear them anyway. "You can turn me into a sparrow, too! Or into a toad! Or into anything you want! And you can consider our friendship dissolved as of this minute. I don't like your ways, that's what. Go on, turn me into a sparrow! And I hope the first cat that sees me gobbles me up!"

The old man was dismayed.

"Can't you see, I'm only doing this to prevent anyone from ever approaching you without the great respect your endless merits call for?"

"No, I can't, and I don't want to!"

"Your every word is my command," Hottabych replied obediently, sincerely puzzled at his saviour's strange softheartedness. "All right, then. I won't turn them into sparrows."

"Nor into anything else!"

"Nor into anything else," the old man agreed meekly. However, he gathered up the hairs with the obvious intention of tearing them to bits.

"Why do you want to tear them?" Volka cried. ; "I'll turn all the goods, all the tables and all the equipment of this despicable shop into

dust!"

"You're mad!" Volka said, really angry by now. "Don't you know that's government property, you dope!"

"And may I inquire, O diamond of my soul, what you mean by the strange word 'dope'?" Hottabych asked.

Volka turned as red as a beet.

"Well you see. . . What I mean is.... Uh... . Well, anyway, 'dope' is a sort of wise man."

Hottabych decided to remember the word, in order to use it in some future conversation.

"But. .." he began.

"No buts! I'll count to three. If, after I say 'three,' you don't leave this cafe alone, we'll call off our friendship and.. . I'm counting: one! two! th...."

Volka did not finish. Shrugging sadly, the old man resumed his usual appearance and muttered in a gloomy voice:

"All right, have it your way. Your good graces are more precious to me than the pupils of my eyes."

"Well, there you are! Now all you have to do is to apologize and we can leave."

"You should be forever grateful to your young saviour," Hottabych shouted sternly to the waitresses, and Volka realized he would never be able to pry an apology from the old man's lips.

"Please excuse us," he said. "And I wish you wouldn't be too angry at this old man. He's a foreigner and doesn't know our ways yet. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," the waitresses answered politely.

They were still rather upset and were both puzzled and frightened. But, of course, they never dreamed how great a danger they had avoided. They followed Hottabych and Volka out and watched the curious old man in an ancient straw boater go down the street and disappear around the corner.

"I can't imagine where such naughty old men come from," Katya sighed and wiped a tear.

"I suppose he's an old-time hypnotist," her brave friend said compassionately. "He's probably a pensioner. Maybe he's just lonely."

"It's no fun to be old," the cashier joined in. "Come on back in, girls."

The day's mischief was not to end there. As Hottabych and Volka reached Gorky Street, they were blinded by an automobile's headlights. A large ambulance, its screaming siren piercing the calm of twilight, seemed to be rushing straight at them.

Hottabych changed colour and wailed loudly:

"Oh, woe is me, an old, unfortunate Genie! Jirjis, the mighty,

merciless king of all Shaitans and Ifrits, has not forgotten our ancient feud and has sent his most awful monster after me!"

With these words he shot straight up from the pavement and, somewhere on the level of the third or fourth storey, he took off his hat, waved it to Volka, and slowly dissolved in the air, shouting:

"I'll find you again, O Volka ibn Alyosha! I kiss the dust beneath your feet! Good-bye!"

To tell the truth, Volka was happy the old man had vanished. Other things were pressing on his mind, and he felt faint at the thought of having to return home.

Really now, try to imagine yourself in his place. He had left the house in the morning to take a geography examination, then go to the movies and be back for supper as expected, at six-thirty. Instead, he was returning after nine, having failed his examination miserably, and, what was most horrible, with shaved cheeks! And him not even thirteen yet! No matter how he racked his brains, he could not find a solution. Thus, without having thought of anything, he dragged his feet back to his quiet side street, now full of long evening shadows.

He walked past the surprised janitor, entered the downstairs hall, climbed a flight of stairs and, with a heavy sigh, pressed the bell. He could hear someone's steps, and a strange voice asked through the door:

"Who's there?"

"It's me," Volka wanted to say, but suddenly remembered that, as of this morning, he didn't live there any more.

Without answering the new tenant, he ran downstairs, marched by the still puzzled janitor nonchalantly, reached the main street, and boarded a trolley-bus. This certainly was his unlucky day: somewhere, most probably at the movies, he had lost his change-purse, so he had to get out and walk home.

Least of all, Volka wanted to meet a classmate, but most unbearable was the thought that he would have to face Goga-the-Pill. Sly Fate had added insult to injury: from this day forth they were both to live in the same house.

Sure enough, no sooner did he enter the yard of his new house than an unbearable, familiar voice shouted:

"Hi, nutty! Who was the old bird you left school with today?"

Goga-the-Pill ran up to Volka, winking insolently and pulling the most insulting faces.

"He wasn't an old bird, he was a nice old man," Volka said peaceably, as he didn't want to end the day with a fight. "He's ... he's my father's friend from Tashkent."

"What if I je-ee-st go to your father and je-ee-st tell him about your

monkey-business at the exam!"

"Oh, Pill, you've gone crying for a beating too long!" Volka flared up, imagining what an impression Pill's words would have on his parents. "Why, you dirty tattle-tale! I'll push your face in!"

"Now, now, take it easy! A person can't even joke any more. You're really a nut!"

Fearing Volka's fists, which, after several encounters, Goga chose to avoid, he dashed headlong into the entrance of the house in which he was now to live in dangerous closeness to Volka, whose new apartment was on the same landing.

"Bald people! A country of bald people!" Goga shouted, sticking his head out the front door. He showed Volka his tongue and, fearing the other's righteous anger, flew up the stairs, two at a time, to his own door.

However, he was distracted by the mysterious behaviour of a huge Siberian cat from apartment 43. The cat, named "Homych" in honour of the popular football goalie, was standing on the stairs with his back arched and hissing at nothing at all.

Goga's first thought was that the cat had gone mad. He reflected again and was nearly certain that mad cats kept their tails between their legs, while Homych's tail was sticking up straight, and in all other respects the animal looked quite healthy.

Goga kicked it-just in case. Homych's yowl of pain, surprise and hurt could be heard on the tenth floor. He jumped so high and gracefully that his famous namesake could have been proud of such a leap.

Then something completely unexpected happened.

A good half yard from the wall, Homych yowled again and flew back in the opposite direction, straight at Goga, just as though the unfortunate animal had hit an invisible but very hard rubber wall. At the same time a gasp could be heard nearby, as if someone had trodden very hard on another person's foot. Courage had never been one of Goga's outstanding virtues, but now he nearly died of fright.

"Oh-h-h!" he moaned softly, feeling all numb. Finally, tearing his leaden feet from the stairs, he made a dash for his flat.

When the apartment door banged shut behind him, Hottabych became visible. He was writhing with pain and examining his left leg, which had been severely scratched by the cat's claws.

"Oh, cursed youth!" Hottabych groaned, after first making sure he was alone on the stairs. "Oh, dog among boys!"

He fell silent and listened. Coming slowly up the stairs, lost in the most grievous thoughts, was his young saviour, Volka Kostylkov.

The sly old man did not want the boy to see him and so dissolved quickly in the air.

A CHAPTER WHICH IS A CONTINUATION OF THE PREVIOUS ONE

No matter how tempting it is to present Volka Kostylkov as a boy without faults, the well-known truthfulness of the author of this tale won't permit him to do so. And if envy is to be justly considered a fault, then, to our great sorrow, we must admit that at times Volka experienced this feeling keenly. During the last few days he had been very envious of Goga. Long before their exams had begun, Goga boasted that his mother had promised him an Alsatian puppy as soon as he was promoted to the 7th grade.

"Sure, you just wait!" Volka had sniffed at the time, feeling that he was turning cold from envy.

In his heart of hearts, he had to admit that Pill's words certainly resembled the truth. The whole class knew that Goga's mother never skimped on anything for her little darling. She'd refuse herself the bare necessities of life, but she'd get Goga a present that would leave them all speechless.

"She'll certainly get me a puppy," Goga persisted. "If you want to know, my mother never refuses me anything. If she promised, it means she'll buy me one. If the worst comes to the worst, she'll borrow some money and buy it. You don't know how highly they think of her at the factory!"

That was true. Goga's mother was greatly respected at the factory. She was the senior draughtsman and was a modest, hard-working and cheerful person. Everyone liked her, both her fellow-workers and her neighbours at home. Even Goga was fond of her in his own way. And she really doted on Goga. Anyway, if she had promised to buy him a puppy, it meant she would.

Perhaps, at this sorrowful moment, when Volka, crushed by all he had gone through that day, was slowly mounting the stairs, Goga-the-Pill, the very same Pill who deserved such happiness less than anyone else in their class, in their school, or even in all of Moscow, was playing with a magnificent, happy, furry puppy right next door, in apartment 37.

Such were Volka's thoughts. The only consideration that afforded him some solace was that it was highly unlikely that Goga's mother, even though she really and truly intended to buy her son a dog, had done so already. After all, Goga had only taken his last exam several hours before, and it's not so easy to buy a puppy. You don't walk into a pet shop and say, "Please wrap up that puppy for me." You have to look long and hard for a good dog.

The very moment Volka's grandmother opened the door, he heard the high-pitched, squeaky yelping of a puppy coming from behind the closed door

of apartment 37.

"So she bought it after all!" he thought bitterly. "An Alsatian.... or maybe even a Boxer...."

It was more than he could bear, to imagine Goga the proud owner of a real, live service dog. Volka slammed the door shut to blot out the exciting, unimaginably wonderful, magical barking of a dog.

He also heard the frightened exclamation which escaped Goga's mother. The puppy had probably bitten him. But even this could not console our young hero.

Volka's father had not yet returned, as he was staying late at a meeting. His mother had apparently called for him at the factory after her evening classes.

Despite all his efforts to appear calm and happy, Volka looked so gloomy that his grandmother decided to give him supper first and then start asking him questions.

"Well, how are things, Volka dear?" she asked hesitantly, when her only grandchild had made quick work of his supper.

"Uh, you see.. ." he said vaguely, pulling off his polo shirt and heading towards his room.

His grandmother followed him with a sorrowful and kindly gaze that was full of silent sympathy. There was no need to ask him any questions. Everything was all too clear.

Volka sighed and got undressed. Then he stretched out under the clean cool sheet. Still, he was restless.

On the night table near his bed lay a large, thick volume in a brightly-coloured dust-cover. Volka's heart skipped a beat. Yes, that was it, the longed-for astronomy book! On the frontispiece in a large familiar hand were the words:

"To Vladimir Kostylkov, the Highly Educated 7th-Grade Student and Acting Member of the Astronomy Club of the Moscow Planetarium, from his Loving Grandma."

What a funny inscription! Grandma always invented something funny. But why didn't it make Volka smile? Oh, why didn't it! And imagine, he wasn't at all happy to have finally received such a fascinating book, the one he had wished for for so long. Grief was eating out his heart. He felt a great weight on his chest.... It was unbearable!

"Grandma!" he shouted, turning away from the book. "Grandma, would you come here a minute?"

"Well, what do you want, mischief-maker?" his grandmother answered, pretending to be angry, but really pleased that she'd have a chance to talk to him before he went to sleep. "Why, the Sandman can't even cope with you, you astronomer! You night owl!"

"Grandma," Volka whispered fervently, "close the door and come sit on my bed. I have to tell you something terribly important."

"Perhaps we'd better put off such an important conversation till morning," his grandmother answered, though she was consumed with curiosity as to what it was all about.

"No, right now. This very minute. I ... Grandma, I wasn't promoted, I mean, I wasn't yet. I didn't pass the exam."

"Did you fail?" his grandmother gasped.

"No, I didn't fail. I didn't pass, but I didn't fail, either. I started to tell them what the ancients thought about India, the horizon, and all kinds of things. Everything I said was right. But I just couldn't tell them about the scientific point of view. I began to feel very bad and Varvara Stepanovna said I should come back after I had had a good rest."

Even now, he could not bring himself to talk about Hottabych, not even to his grandma. Anyway, she'd never believe him and would think he was really ill.

"At first, I didn't want to say anything. I wanted to tell you after I took the exam again, but I felt ashamed. D'you understand?"

"What's there to understand! A person's conscience is a great thing. There's nothing worse than doing something that's against your conscience. Now go to sleep, my dear astronomer!"

"You can take the book back meanwhile," Volka suggested in a trembling voice.

"Nonsense! And where would I put it? Let's consider that I've given it to you for safe-keeping for the time being. Go to sleep now, will you?"

"Yes," Volka answered. A load had fallen from his chest. "And I promise you, upon my word of honour, that I'll get an 'A' in geography. D'you believe me?"

"Certainly, I do. Now go to sleep and get strong. What about Father and Mother? Shall I tell them, or will you tell them yourself?"

"You'd better tell them."

"Well, good night." Grandma kissed him good night, turned off the light, and left the room.

For some while after, Volka lay in the darkness, holding his breath, waiting to hear his grandma tell his mother and father the sad news. However, he fell asleep before they came home.

A RESTLESS NIGHT

Before an hour passed, however, he was suddenly awakened by the ringing

of the telephone in the hall.

His father answered the phone:

"Hello. Yes. Who? Good evening, Varvara Stepanovna?... I'm fine, thank you. And you? ... Volka? He's asleep.... I think he's quite well. He had a very big supper... . Yes, I know. He told us.... I'm terribly surprised myself.... Yes, that's probably the only answer.. .. Certainly, he should rest a while, if you have no objections.... Thank you very much.... Varvara Stepanovna sends you her regards," his father said to his mother. "She wanted to know how Volka is. She said not to worry, because they think very highly of him, and she suggests he have a good rest."

Volka strained his ears listening to what his parents were talking about, but unable to make anything out, he fell asleep. This time he slept no longer than fifteen minutes. The telephone rang again.

"Yes, speaking," he heard his father's muffled voice. "Yes.... Good evening.... What?... No, he's not here.... Yes, he's at home.... Certainly he's at home.... That's quite all right.... Good-bye."

"Who was it?" Volka's mother called from the kitchen. "It was Zhenya Bogorad's father. He sounded very worried. Zhenya's not home yet. He wanted to know whether he was here and if Volka was at home."

"In my time," Grandma said, "only hussars came home this late, but when a child...."

Half an hour later the ringing of the telephone interrupted Volka's sleep for the third time that troubled night. It was Zhenya's mother. He had still not returned. She wanted them to ask Volka if he knew where he was.

"Volka!" his father called, opening the door. "Zhenya's mother wants to know where you saw him last." "At the movies this evening." "And after the movie?" "I didn't see him after that." "Did he say where he was going afterwards?" "No."

For a long, long time after that, Volka waited for the grown-ups to stop talking about Zhenya's disappearance (he himself was not the least bit worried, since he was sure Zhenya had gone to the circus in the recreation park to celebrate), but he fell asleep again before they did. This time till morning.

Soon there was a soft splash in the corner. Then the patter of wet bare feet could be heard. Footprints appeared and quickly dried on the floor. Someone invisible was silently pacing the room, humming a plaintive Eastern melody.

The footprints headed towards the table where an alarm clock was ticking away. There was the sound of lips smacking together with pleasure. Then the alarm clock floated into the air, and for a while it hung suspended between the ceiling and the floor. Then it returned to the table and the footprints headed towards the aquarium. Once again there was a splash. Then

all was quiet.

Late that night it began to rain. The raindrops pattered on the window, they rustled the leaves of the trees and gurgled in the drain-pipes. At times the rain would die down, and then one could hear the large drops falling into the rain barrel below with a loud, ringing splash. Then, as if having gathered its strength, the rain would again pour down in torrents.

Towards morning, when the sky was nearly clear of clouds, someone tapped Volka lightly on the shoulder. He was sound asleep and did not waken. Then, whoever it was who had tried to awaken him, sighed sadly, mumbled, and shuffled towards the high stand with Volka's aquarium. There was a faint splash. Once again a sleepy quiet fell on the room.

THE UNUSUAL EVENTS IN APARTMENT 37

Goga's mother had not bought him a dog after all. She had not had the time to, and later on she never got him one, for after the fantastic events of that terrible evening, both Goga and his mother lost all interest in Man's oldest and truest friend.

But Volka had clearly heard a dog barking in apartment 37. Could he have been mistaken?

No, he was not mistaken.

And yet, there had been no dog in apartment 37 that evening. If you want to know, not so much as a dog's paw entered their house after that evening.

Truly, Volka had no reason to be envious of Goga. There was nothing to be envious of: it was Goga who had barked! It all began while he was washing up for supper. He was very anxious to tell his mother a long and elaborate story about how his classmate and neighbour, Volka Kostylkov, had made a fool of himself at the examination that morning. And it was then that he started barking. Goga didn't bark all the time-some words were real words-but instead of very many other ones, he was surprised and horrified to hear a genuine dog's bark issue from his mouth.

He wanted to say that Volka suddenly began to talk such nonsense at the exam and that Varvara Stepanovna je-ee-st crashed her fist down on the table and je-ee-st screamed, "What nonsense you're babbling, you fool! Why, you hooligan, I'll leave you back another term for this!"

But this is what Goga said instead:

"And suddenly Volka je-ee-st began to bow-wow-wow ... and Varvara Stepanovna je-ee-st crashed her bow-wow-wow!"

Goga was struck dumb with surprise. He was silent for a moment, then he

took a deep breath and tried to repeat the sentence. But instead of saying the rude words, this little liar and tattle-tale wanted to ascribe to Varvara Stepanovna, he began to bark again.

"Oh, Mummie!" he wailed. "Mummie dear!"

"What's the matter with you, darling?" his mother asked anxiously. "You look terrible!"

"I wanted to say that bow-wow-wow.... Oh, Mummie, what's the matter?" Goga had really turned blue from fright.

"Stop barking, dearest! Please stop, my darling, my sweet!"

"I'm not doing it on purpose," Goga whined. "I only wanted to say...."

And once again, instead of human speech, all he could do was to produce an irritable bark.

"Darling! My pet, don't frighten me!" his poor mother pleaded, as the tears ran down her kind face. "Don't bark! I beg you, don't bark!"

At this point Goga could think of nothing better to do than to become angry at his mother. And since he was not used to choosing his words on such occasions, he began barking so fiercely that someone shouted from the next balcony:

"Tell your boy to stop teasing that dog! It's a shame! You've spoiled your child beyond all reason!"

With the tears still pouring down her cheeks, Goga's mother rushed to close the windows. Then she tried to feel Goga's forehead, but this only brought on a new attack of angry barking.

She finally put a completely frightened Goga to bed, wrapped him up in a heavy quilt, though it was a hot summer evening, and ran down to the telephone booth to call an ambulance.

Since she should not tell them the truth, she was forced to say that her son had a very high fever and was delirious.

Soon a doctor arrived. He was a stout, middle-aged man with a grey moustache, many years of experience and an unruffled manner.

The first thing he did, naturally, was to feel Goga's forehead. He discovered the boy had no fever at all. This made him angry, but he did not show it, since the boy's mother looked so terribly grief-stricken. He sighed and sat down on a chair by the bed. Then he asked Goga's mother to explain why she had called an ambulance instead of her regular doctor.

She told him the truth.

The doctor shrugged. He asked her to repeat her story from the beginning. Then he shrugged again, thinking that if this were really true, she should have called a psychiatrist and not a general practitioner.

"Perhaps you think you are a dog?" he asked Goga, as if casually.

Goga shook his head.

"Well, that's something," the doctor thought. "At least it isn't a

mania when people imagine they're dogs."

Naturally, he did not say this aloud, so as not to frighten the patient or his mother, but it was obvious that the doctor was feeling more cheerful.

"Stick out your tongue," he said.

Goga stuck out his tongue.

"It's a very normal-looking tongue. And now, young man, let me listen to your heart. Ah, an excellent heart. His lungs are clear. And how is his stomach?" . "His stomach's fine," his mother said.

"And has he been uh ... barking a long time?"

"For over two hours. I just don't know what to do."

"First of all, calm down. I don't see anything terrible yet. Now, young man, won't you tell me how it all began?"

"Well, it all began from nothing," Goga complained in a small voice. "I was just telling my mother how Volka Kostylkov .bow-wow-wow."

"You see, doctor?" his mother sobbed loudly. "It's terrible. Maybe he needs some pills, or powders, or perhaps he needs a physic?"

The doctor frowned.

"Give me time to think, and I'll look through my books. It's a rare case, a very rare case, indeed. Now, I want him to have a complete rest, no getting off the bed, a light diet, just vegetables and milk products, no coffee or cocoa, weak tea with milk, if desired. And by no means should he go out."

"I couldn't drag him outside if I tried, he's so ashamed. .One of his friends dropped in, and poor Goga barked so long and loud, I had a hard time persuading the boy not to tell anyone about it. But don't you think he needs a physic?"

"Well, a physic can't hurt him," the doctor said thoughtfully.

"And what about mustard plasters before he goes to bed?" she asked, still sobbing.

"That's not bad, either. Mustard plasters are always helpful."

The doctor was about to pat Goga's head, but Pill, anticipating all the bitter medicines he had prescribed, barked so viciously that the old doctor jerked his hand away, frightened lest the unpleasant boy really bite him.

"By the way," he said, gaining control over himself, "why are all the windows closed on such a hot day? The child needs fresh air."

Goga's mother reluctantly explained why she had closed the windows.

"Hm.... A rare case, a very rare case, indeed!" the doctor repeated.

Then he wrote out a prescription and left, promising to come back the next day.

A NO LESS TROUBLED MORNING

Morning dawned bright and beautiful.

At 6:30 a.m. Grandma opened the door softly, tiptoed to the window and opened it wide. Cool, invigorating air rushed into the room. This was the beginning of a cheerful, noisy, busy Moscow morning. But Volka would not have awakened had not his blanket slipped off the bed.

The first thing he did was to feel the bristles on his chin. He realized there was no way out. The situation was hopeless. There could be no question of his going out to greet his parents looking as he did. He snuggled under the blanket again and began to think of what to do.

"Volka! Come on, Volka! Get up!" he heard his father calling from the dining room. He pretended to be asleep and did not answer. "I don't see how anyone can sleep on a morning like this!"

Then he heard his grandmother say:

"Someone should make you take examinations, Alyosha, and then wake you up at the crack of dawn!"

"Well, let him sleep then," his father grumbled. "But don't you worry, he'll get up as soon as he's hungry."

Was it Volka who was supposed not to be hungry?! Why, he kept catching himself thinking about an omlette and a chunk of bread more than about the reddish bristle on his cheeks. But common sense triumphed over hunger, and Volka remained in bed until his father had left for work and his mother had gone shopping.

"Here goes," he decided, hearing the outside door click shut. "I'll tell Grandma everything. We'll think of something together."

Volka stretched, yawned and headed toward the door. As he was passing the aquarium, he glanced at it absently . . . and stopped dead in his tracks. During the night, something had happened in this small, four-cornered glass reservoir, a mysterious event which could in no way be explained from a scientific point of view: yesterday, there were three fishes swimming around inside, but this morning there were four. There was a new fish, a large, fat goldfish which was waving its bright red fins solemnly. When a startled Volka looked at it through the thick glass wall he was nearly certain the fish winked at him slyly.

"Gosh!" he mumbled, forgetting his beard for the moment.

He stuck his hand into the water to catch the mysterious fish, and it seemed that this was just what it was waiting for. The fish slapped its tail against the water, jumped out of the aquarium and turned into Hottabych.

"Whew!" the old man said, shaking off the water and wiping his beard

with a magnificent towel embroidered with gold and silver roosters which had appeared from thin air. "I've been waiting to offer my respects all morning, but you wouldn't wake up and I didn't have the heart to waken you. So I had to spend the night with these pretty fishes, O most happy Volka ibn Alyosha!"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself for making fun of me!" Volka said angrily. "It's really a poor joke to call a boy with a beard happy!"

WHY S. S. PIYORAKI BECAME LESS TALKATIVE

This wonderful morning Stepan Stepanych Pivoraki decided to combine two joys at once. He decided to shave, while taking in the picturesque view of the Moskva River. He moved the little table with his shaving things close to the window and began to lather his cheeks as he hummed a merry tune. We'd like to pause here and say a few words about our new acquaintance.

Pivoraki was a very talkative man, a trait which often made him, though he was actually no fool and very well read, extremely tiresome, even to his best friends.

On the whole, however, he was a nice person and a great master of his trade-which was pattern-making.

When he had finished lathering his cheeks, Stepan Stepanych picked up his razor, drew it back and forth over his palm, and then began to shave with the greatest ease and skill. When he had finished shaving, he sprayed some "Magnolia" cologne on his face and then began to wipe his razor clean. Suddenly, an old man in a white suit and gold-embroidered, petal-pink morocco slippers with queer turned-up toes appeared beside him.

"Are you a barber?" the old man asked a flabbergasted Stepan Stepanych in a stern voice.

"No, I'm not a professional barber. However, on the other hand, I can truthfully say I am a barber, because, while I am not actually a barber, I am a match for any professional barber, for not a single barber can outdo me. And do you know why? Because, while a professional barber..."

The old man interrupted the chattering Pivoraki rudely:

"Can you, O unnecessarily talkative barber, shave a young man well and without cutting him once, although you are not even worthy of kissing the dust beneath his feet?"

"As to the essence of your question, I would say...."

He was about to continue his speech, but here the old man silently gathered up his shaving equipment, took Stepan Stepanych, who was still going a mile a minute, by the scruff of his neck and, without further ado,

flew out the window with him, headed for parts unknown.

Soon they flew into a familiar room, where Volka Kostylkov sat sadly on his bed, moaning every time he looked at himself and his bristly chin in the mirror.

"Happiness and luck accompany you in all your undertakings, O my young master!" Hottabych announced triumphantly, still holding on to the kicking Stepan Stepanych. "I was about to despair of ever finding you a barber when I suddenly came upon this unusually talkative man, and I brought him along to this room beneath the blessed roof of your house. Here he is before you, with everything necessary for shaving. And now," he said to Pivoraki who was gaping at the bristly boy, "lay out your tools properly and shave this honourable youth so that his cheeks become as smooth as those of a young maiden."

Pivoraki stopped struggling. The razor glistened in his skilled hand and a few minutes later Volka was excellently shaved.

"Now put away your tools," the old man said. "I'll fly over for you again early tomorrow morning, and you'll shave this youth once more."

"I can't come tomorrow," Pivoraki objected in a tired voice. "I'm in the morning shift tomorrow."

"That doesn't concern me in the least," Hottabych replied icily. A heavy silence fell on the room. Suddenly, Stepan Stepanych had a bright idea.

"Why don't you try a Tbilisi preparation? It's an excellent remedy."

"Is that some kind of a powder?" Volka interrupted. "Isn't that a greyish powder? I heard about it, or read something about it...."

"Yes, that's it! A greyish powder!" Pivoraki cried happily. "It's made in Georgia, a wonderful and sunny land. I personally am crazy about Georgia. I've travelled back and forth across all the roads in the country during my many vacations. Sukhumi, Tbilisi, Kutaisi... There's no better place for a rest! From the bottom of my heart and from my own experience, I highly recommend that you visit.... Pardon me, I seem to have drifted off the point. Anyway, getting back to the powder.... All you have to do is apply it to your cheeks, and the heaviest beard disappears without a trace. Naturally, it'll grow back again after a while."

"It won't grow back in my young friend's case," Hottabych interrupted.

"Are you positive?"

Hottabych assumed a haughty expression and said nothing. He considered it beneath his dignity to take a lowly barber into his confidence.

A short minute later, an old man wearing an old-fashioned straw boater, a white linen suit and pink morocco slippers with turned-up toes was seen in the locker room of a local bath-house in Tbilisi.

Without bothering to get undressed, he entered the steam room. The

smell of sulphur stung his nostrils, but this was to be expected, as these were the famous Tbilisi sulphur baths. However, a person entering the crowded, steam-filled room fully dressed could not but attract the attention of the other patrons.

Curious eyes followed him as he slowly made his way towards a bright-eyed attendant. He halted within a few steps of the attendant, whose name was Vano, and began to remove his linen coat with an unhurried gesture.

"Genatsvale" (A friendly form of address (Georgian)., Vano said affably, "you are supposed to get undressed in the locker room. This is where you wash."

The old man smirked. He had no intention of washing. It was just that he felt a bit warm with his coat on.

"Come over here!" he said to Vano and fanned himself languidly with his hat. "But hurry, if you value your life."

The attendant smiled pleasantly.

"Genatsvale, on such a lovely morning one values one's life more than ever. What would you like, Grandfather?"

The old man addressed him in a stern voice:

"Tell me nothing but the truth, O bath attendant. Are these really the very famous Tbilisi Baths, of which I've heard so much worthy of amazement?"

"Yes, they're the very same ones," Vano said with pride. "You can travel all over the world, but you'll never find another bath-house like this. I take it you're a stranger here."

The haughty old man let the question go unanswered.

"Well, if these are the very same baths I've been looking for, why don't I see any of that truly magic salve which people who know and are worthy of trust say removes human hair without a trace?"

"Ah, so that's what it's all about!" Vano cried happily. "You want some 'taro.' You should have said so right away."

"All right, if it's called 'taro,' then bring me some 'taro,' but hurry if you...."

"I know, I know: if I value my life. I'm off!"

The experienced bath attendant had met many a queer character in his life and he knew that the wisest thing to do was never to argue.

He returned with a clay bowl filled with something that looked like ashes.

"Here," he said, panting heavily as he handed the old man the bowl. "No place in the world will you find such a wonderful powder. You can take the word of a bath-house attendant!"

The old man's face turned purple with rage.

"You're making a fool of me, O most despicable of all bath-house attendants!" he said in a voice terrible in all its softness. "You promised

to bring me a wonderful salve, but like a marketplace crook, you want to pass off an old dish of powder the colour of a sick mouse!"

The old man snorted so loudly that the entire contents of the bowl rose in a cloud and settled on his hair, eyebrows, moustache and beard, but he was too furious to bother shaking it off.

"You shouldn't be so angry, Genatsvale," the attendant laughed. "Just add some water and you'll have the salve you longed for."

The old man realized he was shouting for nothing and became embarrassed.

"It's hot," he mumbled in some confusion. "May this tiring heat be no more!" and he added very softly: "and while my beard is wet, may my magic powers remain in my fingers.... And so, may this tiresome heat be no more!"

"I'm sorry, but that's something I've no power over," Vano said and shrugged.

"But I have," Hottabych (naturally, it was he) muttered through clenched teeth and snapped the fingers of his left hand.

The attendant gasped. And no wonder: he felt an icy chill coming from where the strange old man stood; the wet floor became covered with a thin sheet of ice and clouds of hot steam from the entire room were drawn towards the cold pole which had formed over Hottabych's head; there, they turned into rain clouds and came down in a drizzle over his head.

"This is much better," he said with pleasure. "Nothing is so refreshing as a cool shower on a hot day."

After enjoying this both unnatural and natural shower for a few minutes, he snapped the fingers of his right hand. The current of cold air was cut off immediately, while the ice melted. Once again clouds of hot steam filled the room.

"And so," Hottabych said, pleased at the impression these unaccountable changes of temperature had made on the other patrons, "and so, let us return to the 'taro.' I am inclined to believe that the powder will really turn into the salve I have come in search of if one adds water to it. I want you to bring me a barrel of this marvellous potion, for I do not have much time at my disposal."

"A barrel?!"

"Even two."

"Oh, Genatsvle! One bowl-full will be more than enough for even the heaviest beard!"

"All right then, bring me five bowls of it."

"In a second!" Vano said, disappearing into an adjoining room. He reappeared in a moment with a heavy bottle stopped with a cork. "There are at least twenty portions here. Good luck."

"Beware, O bath attendant, for I'd not wish anyone to be in your boots

if you have tricked me!"

"How could you even think of such a thing," Vano protested. "Would I ever dare trick such a respectable old man as you! Why, I would never...."

He stood there and gaped, for the amazing, quarrelsome old man had suddenly disappeared into thin air.

Exactly a minute later, a bald old man without eyebrows, a moustache or a beard and dressed in a straw boater, a linen suit and pink slippers with turned-up toes touched Volka Kostylkov's shoulder as the boy was sadly devouring a huge piece of jam tart.

Volka turned round, looked at him, and nearly choked on the cake in amazement.

"Dear Hottabych, what's happened to you?"

Hottabych looked at himself in the wall mirror and forced a laugh. "I suppose it would be exaggerating things to say I look handsome. You may consider me punished for lack of trust and you won't be wrong. I snorted when I was kind-heartedly offered a bowl of 'taro' powder in that far-off bath-house. The powder settled on my eyebrows, moustache and beard. The rain which I called forth in that justly famous place turned the powder into mush, and the rain I was caught in on the way back to Moscow washed off the mush together with my beard, moustache, and eyebrows. But don't worry about my appearance. Let's better worry about yours." Then he sprinkled some powder into a plate.

When Volka's beard and moustache were disposed of, Hottabych snapped the fingers of his left hand and once again assumed his previous appearance.

Now he looked at himself in the mirror with true satisfaction. He stroked his recovered beard and twisted the ends of his moustache jauntily. Then he passed his hand over his hair, smoothed his eyebrows and sighed with relief.

"Excellent ! Now both our faces are back to normal again."

As concerns Stepan Stepanych Pivoraki, who will never again appear on the pages of our extremely truthful story, it is a known fact that he became a changed man after the events described above. Why, it seems only yesterday that his friends, who suffered so acutely from his talkativeness, named every chatter-box "Pivoraki." However, he has now become so sparing with his words, weighing each one carefully beforehand, that it is a joy to talk to him and listen to him speak at meetings.

Just think what an effect this incident had on him!

AN INTERVIEW WITH A DIVER

Zhenya Bogorad's parents were up all night. They telephoned all their friends and, taking a cab, made the rounds of every militia station in the city, and of every hospital. They even stopped off at the criminal court, but all to no avail. Zhenya had disappeared without a trace.

The following morning the principal of the school called in Zhenya's classmates, including Volka, and questioned each one.

Volka told the principal about meeting Zhenya at the movies the night before, though he quite naturally said nothing about his beard. The boy who sat next to Zhenya in class recalled that he had seen him on Pushkin Street close to six o'clock the previous evening, that he was in high spirits and was rushing to the movies. Other children said the same, but this was of no help.

Suddenly, one boy remembered Zhenya said he wanted to go swimming too.

In half an hour's time every volunteer life guard in the city was searching for Zhenya Bogorad's body. The river was dragged within the city limits, but yielded nothing. Divers traversed the entire river-bed, paying special attention to holes and depressions, but they, too, found nothing.

The fiery blaze of sunset was slowly sinking beyond the river, a faint breeze carried the low sounds of a siren from the recreation park, a signal that the second act of the evening's play at the summer theatre was about to begin, but the dark silhouettes of the river boats could still be seen on the water. The search was still on.

This cool, quiet evening Volka was too restless to sit at home. Terrifying thoughts of Zhenya's fate gave him no peace. He decided to go back to school, perhaps there was some news there. As he was leaving the school yard, Hottabych joined him silently at the gate, appearing from nowhere at all. The old man saw Volka was upset, yet he was too tactful to annoy him with his questions. Thus, they continued on in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Soon they were walking down the wide granite embankment of the Moskva River.

"What kind of strange-headed people are standing in those frail vessels?" the old man asked, pointing to the river boats.

"Those are divers," Volka answered sadly.

"Peace be with you, O noble diver," Hottabych said grandly to one of the divers climbing out of a boat near the bank. "What are you searching for on the bottom of this beautiful river?"

"A boy drowned," the diver answered and hurried up the steps of the first-aid station.

"I have no more questions, O highly respected diver," Hottabych said to his disappearing back.

Then he returned to Volka, bowed low and exclaimed:

"I kiss the ground beneath your feet, O most noble student of Secondary

School No. 245!"

"Huh?" Volka started, shaken from his unhappy thoughts.

"Am I correct in understanding that this diver is searching for the youth who has the great honour of being your classmate?"

Volka nodded silently and heaved a great sigh.

"Is he round of face, sturdy of body, snub of nose and sporting a haircut unbecoming to a boy?"

"Yes, that was Zhenya. He had a haircut like a real dandy," Volka said and sighed heavily again.

"Did we see him in the movies? Was it he who shouted something to you and made you sad, because he'd tell everyone you had such a beard?"

"Yes. How did you know what I was thinking then?"

"Because that's what you mumbled when you tried to conceal your honourable and most beautiful face from him," the old man continued. "Don't fear, he won't tell!"

"That's not true!" Volka said angrily. "That doesn't bother me at all. On the contrary, I'm sad because Zhenya drowned."

Hottabych smirked triumphantly.

"He didn't drown!"

"What do you mean? How d'you know he didn't drown?"

"Certainly I am the one to know," Hottabych said. "I lay in wait for him near the first row in the dark room and I said to myself in great anger, 'No, you will tell nothing, O Zhenya! Nothing which is unpleasant to your great, wise friend Volka ibn Alyosha, for never again will you see anyone who will believe you or will be interested in such news!' That's what I said to myself as I tossed him far away to the East, right to where the edge of the Earth meets the edge of the Heavens and where, I assume, he has already been sold into slavery. There he can tell whomever he wants to about your beard."

CHARTING A FLIGHT

"What do you mean-slavery?! Sell Zhenya Bogorad into slavery?!" a shaken Volka asked.

The old man saw that something had gone wrong again, and his face became very sour.

"It's very simple. It's quite usual. Just like they always sell people into slavery," he mumbled, rubbing his hands together nervously and avoiding Volka's eyes. "That's so he won't babble for nothing, O most pleasant dope in the world."

The old man was very pleased at having been able to put the new word he had learned from Volka the night before into the conversation. But his young saviour was so upset by the terrible news that he really didn't pay attention to having been called dope for nothing.

"That's horrible!" Volka cried, holding his head. "Hottabych, d'you realize what you've done?"

"Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab always realizes what he does!"

"Like hell you do! For no reason at all, you're ready to turn good people into sparrows or sell them into slavery. Bring Zhenya back here immediately!"

"No!" Hottabych shook his head. "Don't demand the impossible of me!"

"But do you find it possible to sell people into slavery? Golly, you can't even imagine what I'll do if you don't bring Zhenya right back!"

To tell the truth, Volka himself had no idea what he could do -s to save Zhenya from the clutches of unknown slave dealers, but he would have thought of something. He would have written to some ministry or other. But which ministry? And what was he to say?

By now the readers of this book know Volka well enough to agree that he's no cry-baby. But this was too much, even for Volka. Yes, our courageous, fearless Volka sat down on the edge of the first bench he came upon and broke into tears of helpless rage.

The old man asked anxiously:

"What is the meaning of this crying that has overcome you? Answer me, and do not tear my heart apart, O my young saviour."

But Volka, regarding the old man with hate-filled eyes; pushed him away as he leaned over him with concern.

Hottabych looked at Volka closely, sucked his lips and said thoughtfully:

"I'm really amazed. No matter what I do, it just doesn't seem to make you happy. Though I'm trying my best to please you, all my efforts are in vain. The most powerful potentates of the East and West would often appeal to my magic powers, and there was not a single one among them who was not grateful to me later and did not glorify my name in words and thoughts. And look at me now! I'm trying to understand what's wrong, but I cannot. Is it senility? Ah, I'm getting old!"

"Oh no, no, Hottabych, you still look very young," Volka said through his tears.

And true enough, the old man was well preserved for being close on four thousand years of age. No one would have ever given him more than seventy or seventy-five. Any of our readers would have looked much older at his age.

"You flatter me," Hottabych smiled and added: "No, it is not within my powers to return your friend Zhenya immediately."

Volka's face turned ashen from grief.

"But," the old man continued significantly, "if his absence upsets you so, we can fly over and fetch him."

"Fly?! So far away? How?"

"How? Not on a bird, of course," Hottabych answered craftily. "Obviously, on a magic carpet, O greatest dope in the world."

This time Volka noticed that he had been called such an unflattering name. "Whom did you call a dope?!" he flared.

"Why, you, of course, O Volka ibn Alyosha, for you are wise beyond your years," Hottabych replied, being extremely pleased that he was again able to use his new word so successfully in a conversation.

Volka was about to feel offended. However, he blushed as he recalled that he had no one to blame but himself. Avoiding the old man's honest eyes, he asked him never again to call him a dope, for he was not worthy of such a great honour.

"I praise your modesty, O priceless Volka ibn Alyosha," Hottabych said with great respect.

"When can we start?" Volka asked, still unable to overcome his embarrassment.

"Right now, if you wish."

"Then let's be off!" However, he added anxiously, "I don't know what to do about Father and Mother. They'll worry if I fly away without telling them, but if I tell them, they won't let me go."

"Let it worry you no more," the old man said. "I'll cast a spell on them and they won't think of you once during our absence."

"You don't know my parents!"

"And you don't know Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab!"

THE FLIGHT

In one corner of the magic carpet the pile was rather worn, most probably due to moths. On the whole, however, it was wonderfully preserved and the fringes were as good as new. Volka thought he had seen exactly the same kind of carpet before, but he could not recall whether it was in Zhenya's house or in the Teachers' Room at school.

They took off from the river bank without a single witness to their departure. Hottabych took Volka's hand and stood him in the middle of the carpet beside himself; he then yanked three hairs from his beard, blew on them, and whispered something, rolling his eyes skyward. The carpet

trembled. One after the other, all four tassled corners rose. Then the edges buckled and rose, but the middle remained on the grass, weighted down by the two heavy passengers. After fluttering a bit, the carpet became motionless.

The old man bustled about in confusion.

"Excuse me, O kind Volka. There's been a mistake somewheres. I'll fix everything in a minute."

Hottabych was quiet as he did some complex figuring on his fingers. He apparently got the right answer, because he beamed. Then he yanked six more hairs from his beard, tore off half of one hair and threw it away, and then blew on the others, saying the magic words and rolling his eyes skyward. Now the carpet ' straightened out and became as flat and as hard as a staircase landing. It soared upwards, carrying off a smiling Hottabych and Volka, who was dizzy from exhilaration, or the height, or from both together.

The carpet rose over the highest trees, over the highest houses, over the highest factory stacks and sailed over the city that was blinking with a million lights below. They could hear muffled voices, automobile horns, people singing in row boats on the river and the far-off music of a band.

The city was plunged in twilight, but here, high up in the air, they could still see the crimson ball of the sun sinking slowly beyond the horizon.

"I wonder how high up we are now?" Volka said thoughtfully.

"About 600 or 700 elbows," Hottabych answered, still figuring out something on his fingers.

Meanwhile, the carpet settled on its course, though still gaining height. Hottabych sat down majestically, crossing his legs and holding on to his hat. Volka tried to sit down cross-legged, as Hottabych had, but found neither pleasure nor satisfaction from this position. He shut his eyes tight to overcome his awful dizziness and sat down on the edge of the carpet, dangling his legs over the side. Though this was more comfortable, the wind tore at his legs mercilessly; it blew them off to a side and they were constantly at a sharp angle to his body. He soon became convinced that this method was no good either, and finally settled down with his legs stretched out before him on the carpet.

In no time, he felt chilled to the bone. He thought sadly of his warm jacket that was so far below in his closet at home, hundreds of miles away.

As a last resort, he decided to warm up the way cabbies used to do in the olden days, long before he was born. His father once showed him how it was done when they were out ice skating. Volka began to slap his shoulders and sides in sweeping motions, and in the twinkling of an eye he slipped off the carpet and into nothingness.

Needless to say, if he had not grabbed on to the fringes, our story would have ended with this unusual air accident.

Hottabych did not even notice what had happened to his young friend. He was sitting with his back to Volka, his legs tucked under him in Eastern fashion and lost in thought. He was trying to recall how to break spells he himself had cast.

"Hottabych!" Volka howled, feeling that he wouldn't last long, as he hung on to the fringes. "Help, Hottabych!"

"O woe is me!" the old man cried, seeing that Volka was flying through the air. "Shame on my old grey head! I would have killed myself if you had perished!"

Muttering and calling himself all kinds of names for being so careless, he dragged a petrified Volka back up on the carpet, sat him down and put his arm around the boy, firmly resolved not to let go of him until they landed.

"It would be g-g-good t-t-to h-h-have s-s-something w-w-warm to wear!" Volka said wistfully through chattering teeth.

"S-s-sure, O gracious Volka ibn Alyosha!" Hottabych answered and covered him with a quilted robe that appeared from nowhere.

It became dark. Now it was especially uncomfortable on the magic carpet. Volka suggested that they rise another 500 elbows or so. "Then we'll see the sun again."

Hottabych greatly doubted that they could see the sun before morning, since it had already set, but he didn't argue.

You can imagine how surprised he was and how his esteem for Volka grew, when, as they rose higher, they really saw the sun again! For a second time its crimson edge was barely touching the black line of the far horizon.

"Oh, Volka, if only I had not promised myself faithfully to obey your modest request, nothing would prevent me from calling you the greatest dope in the world," Hottabych cried ecstatically. However, when he saw how displeased Volka was, he quickly added, "but since you forbade it, I shall limit myself to expressing my amazement at the unusual maturity of your mind. I "promised never to call you a dope and I won't."

"And don't call anyone else by that name, either."

"All right, O Volka," Hottabych agreed obediently.

"Do you swear?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Now don't forget," Volka said in a tone of satisfaction that puzzled Hottabych.

Far below them forests and fields, rivers and lakes, villages and cities sailed by, adorned in softly glowing pearly strings of electric lights. A sea of clouds with hard round edges appeared;

they darkened and disappeared in the blackness below, but the carpet kept on flying farther and farther away to the south-east, closer and closer to the strange land where the young prisoner

Zhenya Bogorad was probably already suffering at the hands of fierce and terrible slave traders.

"To think that poor Zhenya's breaking his back at hard labour," Volka said bitterly after a long silence.

A guilty Hottabych only grunted in reply.

"He's all alone in a strange land, without any friends or relatives. The poor fellow's probably groaning," Volka continued sadly.

Hottabych again said nothing.

If only our travellers could have heard what was happening that very minute, thousands of miles away to the East!

Far away in the East, Zhenya Bogorad was really groaning.

"Oh no, I can't!" Zhenya moaned, "Oh no, no more!"

In order to describe the circumstances under which he uttered these heart-rending words, we shall have to part with our travellers for a while and relate the experiences of Zhenya Bogorad, a pioneer group leader of 6B (7B, as of the day before) of Moscow Secondary School No. 245.

ZHENYA BOGORAD'S ADVENTURES FAR AWAY IN THE EAST

As soon as Zhenya Bogorad, seated in the first row of the Saturn Theatre, turned around to catch a glimpse of the bearded boy before the movie began, everything suddenly went dark, he heard an ear-splitting whistle, and instead of the hard floor beneath his feet, he felt he was standing in tall grass.

When his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he was greatly amazed to discover that he was in a dense forest filled with the aroma of strange flowers. Lianas hung from huge trees, the likes of which he had never seen before. Yes, these were definitely lianas. It was hot and humid, much hotter than it had been in the projection room.

Holding his arms out, Zhenya took several cautious steps and nearly trod on a ... snake! The snake hissed like a broken bicycle pump, flashed its small green eyes and disappeared in the bushes.

"Golly! Where am I?!" Zhenya wondered, not daring to move. "It's just like the jungles. It's just like a dream. Why, sure," he thought happily, "sure, this is all a dream! I'm sleeping and this is a dream."

At one time or another everyone has had a dream in which he knows quite clearly that he is dreaming. It's fun to have such a dream: no dangers frighten you, and you always succeed in the most hazardous feats. Most important, you know the time will come when you'll awake safe and sound in your own bed.

However, when Zhenya attempted to make his way through the prickly bushes, he really got scratched. Since it's most unpleasant to be hurt, even

though you are quite positive everything is just a dream, Zhenya decided to doze off till morning.

When he awoke, he saw the hot, pale blue sky shining brightly through the openings in the crowns of the trees. Zhenya was overjoyed to find his wonderful dream still continuing!

The first thing he saw when he found his way to the edge of the forest were four elephants carrying huge logs in their trunks. A thin, dark-skinned man, naked to the waist and wearing a white turban, was riding the lead elephant.

In the distance, smoke curled from the rooftops of a small village. Now Zhenya knew what he was dreaming about. He was dreaming about India! This was really wonderful. Yet, still more wonderful things awaited him.

"Who are you?" the man on the elephant asked Zhenya dryly. "An Englishman? A Portuguese? An American?"

"No," Zhenya answered in broken English. "I Russian, Rusi." Just to make sure, he pointed to himself and said, "Hindi Rusi bhai, bhai."

At this, the man on the elephant beamed and nodded so vigorously that it was a wonder his turban didn't fall off his head.

Then he made his elephant kneel and he took Zhenya up beside him. The whole cavalcade, swaying majestically, continued towards the village.

On the way they met several children.

The man shouted something to them; they gaped and stared at the real-life Soviet boy. Then they dashed back to the village, shouting and skipping. By the time Zhenya Bogorad, a 7B pupil of Moscow Secondary School No. 245, arrived in the village riding the head elephant, its entire population had poured out into the narrow single street.

What a welcome it was!

Zhenya was helped down respectfully, he was led into a room and offered food, which was more than welcome, since he found that even in his sleep he was hungry. Imagine, what a real dream he was having! Then people approached him and shook his hand, then everybody sang a long and plaintive Indian song. Zhenya sang along with them as best he could and everyone was terribly pleased. Then Zhenya sang the democratic youth song and some boys and girls joined in, while the rest sang along as best they could. Then everyone began coaxing a young Hindu youth and he finally gave in and began another song, which Zhenya recognized as "Katyusha." He joined in enthusiastically, while everyone else clapped in rhythm to the song. Then they shook his hand again and everyone shouted Hindi Rusi bhai, bhai!

When things settled down a bit, the whole village began a conversation with Zhenya. However, since neither he nor the villagers knew very much English, it took a long time for them to discover whether Zhenya was in a hurry to get to Delhi and the Soviet Embassy. But Zhenya was in no special

rush. Why should a person hurry when he's having such an interesting and pleasant dream?

In no time, delegates from a neighbouring village arrived to lead the honoured guest to their village. In this village and in the three others he visited during that wonderful day the scene which had taken place in the first village was repeated again and again.

He spent the night in the fourth village. At day-break delegates from a fifth village were awaiting him. This was when Zhenya began to moan a bit.

Just try not to moan when hundreds of friendly arms toss you up to the accompaniment of: Hindi Rusi bhai, bhai and overflowing emotions make them toss you as high as the clouds.

Luckily for him, they soon heard the rumbling of a small truck which was going past the closest railway station and which was to take Zhenya along.

Smiling villagers surrounded the perspiring boy, they shook his hands and embraced him. Two girls came running up with a large wreath of flowers and put it around his neck. The young guest blushed. Three boys and their schoolteacher brought him a gift of a large bunch of bananas. On behalf of all the villagers, the teacher wished Zhenya a happy journey. The children asked him to say hello to the children of Moscow from the children of India and they also asked for his autograph, just as if he had been a famous person. Naturally, he could not refuse.

Clutching the bunch of bananas with both hands and bowing to all sides, Zhenya was being helped onto the running board when suddenly he ... disappeared. He simply vanished!

This in itself was worthy of great amazement, but more amazing still was the fact that not a single villager was surprised at this. They were not surprised, because they immediately and completely forgot all about Zhenya. But we, dear reader, should by no means be surprised that they forgot about him so quickly.

TRA-LA-LA, O IBN ALYOSHA!

There is nothing more dangerous than falling asleep on a magic carpet without having first taken the necessary precautions.

Tired from all their experiences and lulled to sleep by the complete quiet that surrounded them, Hottabych and Volka did not notice how they dozed off under the warm quilted robes that had appeared from nowhere.

Volka had curled up cosily and slept a dreamless sleep, but Hottabych, who had fallen asleep sitting up uncomfortably, with his chest pressed

against his sharp old knees, had a terrible dream.

He dreamt that the servants of Sulayman, son of David, led by the Vizier Asaf ibn Barakhiya, were once again about to imprison him in a clay vessel and that they had stuffed him halfway in already, but that he was struggling desperately, pressing his chest against the mouth of the bottle. He dreamt that his wonderful young friend and saviour was about to be stuffed into another vessel and then neither of them would ever be rescued, while poor Zhenya would have to suffer the slave's lot to the end of his days, with no one to save him. Worst of all, someone had a firm hold on Hottabych's arms so that he was unable to yank a single hair from his beard and therefore was unable to use his magic powers to save himself and Volka. Realizing that it would be too late to do anything in a few more moments, Hottabych exerted all his energy. In great despair he plunged sideways, forcefully enough to fall completely out of the vessel. Before really waking up, he slipped off the carpet into the cold black void below.

Fortunately, his shout awakened Volka. The boy was just able to grab his left arm. Now it was Hottabych's turn to fly in tow behind the carpet. However, the tow was not very firm: the old man was too heavy for Volka. They would probably have plunged downwards from this great height to the unseen Earth below, if Hottabych had not managed to yank a whole batch of hair from his beard with his free hand and rattle off the necessary magic words.

Suddenly, Volka found he could pull the old man up quite easily.

Our young fellow's happiness would have been complete, had not Hottabych been bellowing, "Aha, O Volka! Everything's in top shape, O my precious one!" and trying to sing something and laughing with such wild glee all the while Volka was pulling him up that he really became worried: what if the old man had lost his mind from fright? True, once Hottabych found himself on the carpet, he stopped singing. Yet, he could think of nothing better to do than begin a jig. And this in the middle of the night! On a shabby, threadbare old magic carpet!

"Tra-la-la, O Volka! Tra-la-la, O ibn Alyosha!" Hottabych yelled in the darkness, raising his long skinny legs high and constantly running the danger of falling off the carpet again.

Finally, he gave in to Volka's pleas and stopped dancing. Instead, he began to sing again. At first he sang "When Your Far-off Friend is Singing," terribly off-key and then went on to mutilate an old Gypsy love song called "Open the Garden Gate," which he had heard goodness knows where. All at once, he stopped singing, crouched, and yanked several hairs from his beard. Volka guessed what he was doing by the slight crystal tinkling.

In a word, if you ever forget something very important and just can't recall it, there's no better remedy than to fall off a magic carpet, if even

for a second. Such a fall really clears one's memory. At least it helped Hottabych recall how to break spells he himself had cast.

Now there was no need to continue the difficult and dangerous flight to rescue the unfortunate Zhenya Bogorad from slavery. Indeed, the sound of crystal tinkling was still in the air when Zhenya fell out of the darkness and onto the magic carpet, clutching a twenty-pound bunch of bananas.

"Zhenya!" Volka shouted happily.

The magic carpet could not withstand the extra weight and plunged downward with a whistling sound. Suddenly, it became damp and chilly. The stars shining overhead disappeared. They had entered a cloud bank.

"Hottabych!" Volka shouted. "We have to get out of here, up over the clouds!"

But Hottabych did not answer. Through the heavy fog they could barely make out the shrivelled figure with his collar turned up. The old man was hurriedly yanking one hair after another from his beard. There was a sound like plink, like a tightly stretched string on a home-made children's balalaika. With a moan of despair, Hottabych would throw out the hair and yank out another. Once again they'd hear the plink, once again the moan of despair, and the despondent mumbling of the old Genie.

"Hey, Volka," Zhenya said, "What's this we're flying on? It looks like a magic carpet."

"That's exactly what it is. Hottabych, what's taking you so long?"

"There's no such thing as a magic carpet," Zhenya said. "Help!"

The carpet had dipped sharply.

Volka had no time to argue with Zhenya.

"Hottabych, what's the matter?" he said, tugging at the old man's damp coat sleeve.

"O woe is me!" came the hollow, sobbing voice of a faintly visible Hottabych through the whistling of the falling carpet. "O woe is all of us! I'm soaked from head to toe!"

"We're all drenched!" Volka shouted back angrily. "What selfishness!"

"My beard! Alas, my beard is wet!"

"Ha, what a thing to worry about!" Zhenya smirked.

"My beard is wet!" Hottabych repeated in terrible grief. "I'm as helpless as a babe. You need dry hair for magic, the very driest kind of hair!"

"We'll go smack against the ground!" Volka said in a wooden voice. "There'll just be a little wet spot left from all of us."

"Wait! Wait a minute!" Zhenya panted. "The main thing is not to get panicky! What do people in balloons do in such a case?"

In such a case, people flying in balloons throw their extra ballast overboard. Farewell, my dear Indian bananas!"

With these words he tossed the heavy bunch of bananas into the darkness. They began to fall more slowly. Then they stopped falling altogether. The carpet swerved upwards and was caught in an air current which carried them to the right of their previous course.

Zhenya was dying to know what this was all about, and so he asked Volka in a whisper:

"Volka, Volka! Who's the old man?"

"Later," Volka whispered back. "I'll tell you later, when we get back on the ground. Understand?"

All Zhenya understood was that for some very important reason or other all his questions would have to wait till later.

Volka shared his robe with Zhenya and gradually all three dozed off.

MEET MY FRIEND

Volka awoke from a pleasant ringing sound, like the tinkling of crystal chandelier pendants. Still half asleep, he thought it was Hottabych yanking magic hairs. But no, the old man was snoring softly, sleeping like a babe. The tinkling sound was coming from the icicles on his beard and the frozen carpet fringes flying in the fresh morning wind.

In the East, the blinding sun was rising. It kept getting warmer and warmer. The icicles on Hottabych's beard and on the fringes melted; the icy crust that had covered the rest of the carpet also melted. Hottabych turned over on his side, yawned and began to snore with a whistle, as if there really was a pipe in his nose.

Zhenya woke up from the dampness and the warmth. Leaning towards Volka's chilled ear he whispered:

"Do tell me who the old man is?"

"Come clean," Volka whispered back, keeping a wary eye on Hottabych. "Did you want to talk to the fellows about me behind my back?"

"What of it?"

"Just that he doesn't like it."

"What doesn't he like?"

"He doesn't like people to go blabbering about me!"

"Humph!"

"Humph yourself! Presto! And you're in a desert. It's all very-simple."

Zhenya wasn't convinced.

Volka cast another wary glance at Hottabych and moved closer to his friend's ear.

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"What a silly question!"

"Not even a bit?"

"Of course not."

"Well, believe it or not, but this old man is a Genie, a real live Genie from the Arabian Nights!"

"Boloney!"

"And he was the one who got everything messed up during the exam. He prompted me and I had to repeat everything like a parrot."

"Him?!"

"But don't say a word about my having failed. He swore to kill all the teachers if they failed me. And now I'm knocking myself out to save Varvara Stepanovna from his magic. I have to keep distracting him all the time. Understand?"

"Not really."

"Well, be quiet anyway!"

"Don't worry, I will," Zhenya whispered thoughtfully. "Then he was the one who tossed me into India?"

"Sure he was. And he got you back from India, too. If you want to know, he sent you there so they could sell you into slavery."

Zhenya giggled.

"Me, a slave? Ha-ha-ha!"

"Ssh! You'll wake him up."

But Volka's warning came too late. Hottabych opened his eyes and yawned.

"Good morning, O Volka. Am I correct in assuming that this young man is none other than your friend Zhenya?"

"Yes, I'd like you to meet him," Volka said, introducing his recovered friend to Hottabych as if all this was taking place in the most ordinary of circumstances and not on a magic carpet high above the Earth.

"Pleased to meet you," Zhenya said solemnly.

Hottabych was silent for a moment, looking at the boy closely to decide whether or not he was worth a kind word. He apparently became convinced that Volka had not made a mistake in choosing his friend and so smiled his most amiable smile.

"There is no end to my happiness at meeting you. Any friend of my young master is my best friend."

"Master?" Zhenya asked.

"Master and saviour."

"Saviour?!" Zhenya repeated and giggled.

"There's no need to laugh," Volka stopped him sternly. "There's nothing to laugh about."

In as few words as possible, he told Zhenya everything our attentive

readers already know.

HAVE MERCY ON US, O MIGHTY RULER!

Twice that day the magic carpet passed through heavy cloud banks, and each time Hottabych's nearly dry beard would again become so damp it was no use thinking about even the simplest kind of magic-something that would get them some food, for instance. They were beginning to feel hungry. Even Zhenya's description of his adventures of the previous day could not take their minds away from food. But, most important, there was no end to their flight in sight.

They were hungry, bored, and extremely uncomfortable. The carpet seemed to be stuck in mid-air, so slowly did it fly and so monotonous was the steppe stretching far below them. At times, cities or little blue ribbons of rivers would drift by slowly, and then once again they saw nothing but steppe and endless fields of ripening wheat. Zhenya was right in saying they were flying over the southern part of the country. Then, suddenly, ahead and to the right of them, as far as the eye could see, there was blue water below. To the left was the ragged line of distant mountains.

"It's the Black Sea!" the boys shouted in unison.

"O woe is us," Hottabych cried. "We're going straight out to sea!"

Fortunately, a capricious air current turned the carpet a bit to the left and tossed it into another cloud bank at top speed. Thus, it was carried along the Caucasian coastline.

Through an opening in the clouds, Zhenya noticed the city of Tuapse far below, its boats on anchor at the long, jutting pier.

Then everything was lost in a thick fog again. Our travellers' clothing once again-for the hundredth time!-became wet. The carpet was so water-logged and heavy that it began to fall sharply with a whistling sound. In a few short seconds the clouds were left far above. Soon, the famous resort city of Sochi flashed by below in the blinding rays of the setting sun.

As it descended lower and lower, the carpet passed over the broad white band of the Sochi-Matsesta Highway. The three passengers, horror-stricken in expectation of their near and terrible end, thought that the highway, studded on both sides by former palaces which were now rest homes, was dashing towards them at a mad speed.

They had a momentary glimpse of a beautiful bridge thrown over a deep,

narrow valley.

Then they were grazing the tree-tops. It seemed as if they could touch them if they leaned over.

Then they flew over a sanatorium with a high escalator which took the bathers up from the beach in a pretty little car.

Several minutes later, amidst a shower of spray, the carpet plunged into the swimming pool of another sanatorium. The place was quiet and deserted, as it was supper time and all the vacationers were in the dining room. Shedding water and puffing, our ill-fated travellers climbed out of the pool.

"It could have been worse," Volka said, looking around curiously.

"Sure," Zhenya agreed. "We could have crashed into a building just as easy as pie. Or into a mountain."

It was a good thing there was no one close by. The travellers sat down on beach chairs placed near the pool. They undressed, wrung out their wet clothes, pulled them on again, shivering and groaning with cold, and then left the swimming enclosure.

"If only I could dry my beard, everything would be just lovely," Hottabych said with concern and touched it, just to make sure. "Ah, me! It's quite damp!"

"Let's look for the kitchen," Zhenya suggested. "Maybe they'll let you dry it near the stove. Boy, what wouldn't I give for a big chunk of bread and some sausage!"

"Or some fried potatoes," Volka added.

"You're breaking my heart, O my young friends," Hottabych cried woefully. "It's all my fault that you...." .

"No, it's not your fault at all," Volka consoled him. "Let's go look for the kitchen."

They passed the deserted tennis court, went down a paved path under a high arch and found themselves before the majestic, snow-white columns of a miners' sanatorium. A circular fountain with a pool as big as a dance floor shot up foaming sprays of water, right to the third-storey windows. All the windows of the main building were brightly lit.

"Our end has come!" Hottabych gasped. "We're in the palace of a most wealthy and mighty potentate. His guards will be on us any minute and chop off our heads, and I'm the only one to blame! O woe! Oh, such terrible shame on my old grey head!"

Zhenya giggled. Volka nudged him, to make him still and not tease the old man.

"What guards? Which heads?" Volka asked with annoyance. "It's a very ordinary sanatorium. What I mean is, not very ordinary, but very nice. Though I think they're all the same here in Sochi."

"I was an expert on palaces, O Volka, when your great-great-great-grandfather wasn't even born, and I, for one, certainly know that guards will come running any minute and.... O woe is us! Here they come!"

The boys also heard the sounds of running feet on the staircase of the main building.

"Jafar!" someone hanging over the banister shouted from above. "We'll look for them together after supper! They can't disappear this late at night! Jafar!"

"Did you hear him?" Hottabych cried, grabbing the boys' hands. He dragged them off to a side path as fast as he could and from there into the nearest bushes.

"Did you hear him? That was the Sergeant of the Guard shouting. They'll go looking for us after supper, and they'll certainly find us. But my beard has soaked up as much water as a sponge, and I'm as helpless as a babe!"

Just then he happened to glance at two towels hanging over the back of a park bench.

"Allah be praised!" he cried excitedly, running towards the towels. "These will help me dry my beard! Then we won't have to fear any guards in the world."

He picked up first one and then the other towel and groaned:

"O Allah! They are quite damp! And the guards are so close!"

Nevertheless, he hurriedly began to dry his beard.

It was while he was drying it that an Azerbaijanian of tremendous height, dressed in a dark red robe, came upon them. He appeared from behind the pink bushes as unexpectedly as a Jack-in-the-box.

"Aha!" he said rather calmly. "Here they are. Tell me, my dear man, is this your towel?"

"Spare us, O mighty ruler!" Hottabych cried, falling to his knees. "You can chop off my head, but these youths are in no way guilty. Let them go free! They have lived but such a short while!"

"Hottabych, get up and don't make a fool of yourself!" Volka said in great embarrassment. "What kind of a ruler are you talking about? He's just a very ordinary man here on a holiday."

"I won't get up until this wonderful and merciful sultan promises to spare your lives, O my young friends!"

The Azerbaijanian shrugged his mighty shoulders and said, "My dear citizen, why are you insulting me? What kind of a sultan am I? I'm an ordinary Soviet citizen." He puffed out his chest and added, "I'm Jafar Alt Muhammedov, a drilling foreman. Do you know where Baku is?"

Hottabych shook his head.

"Do you know where Bibi-Aibat is?"

Hottabych shook his head again.

"Don't you read the papers? Now, what are you kneeling for? That's shameful. Oh, how very shameful and embarrassing, my dear man!"

Muhammedov

pulled the old man to his feet.

"Wait a minute!" Volka whispered like a conspirator, taking Muhammedov off to a side. "Don't pay any attention to the old man. He's off his rocker. And the worst part of it is, we're so wet."

"Ah! Did you get caught in the rain in the mountains too? I came back as wet as a mouse. Vai, vai! The old man may catch cold. Dear man," he said, catching Hottabych under the arms as he was about to fall to his knees again. "You look very familiar. Are you from Gandji? You look like my father, except that he's older. My father's going on eighty-three."

"Then know ye, O mighty ruler, that I am going on three thousand seven hundred and thirty-three!" Hottabych replied hotly.

It was only to Muhammedov's credit that he didn't bat an eyelid upon hearing these words. He merely nodded understandingly to Volka, who was winking hard from behind Hottabych's back.

Pressing his right hand to his heart, the drilling foreman answered Hottabych politely, "Of course, my good man, of course. But you're so well preserved. Let's go and warm up. We'll have something to eat and rest or else you might catch cold. Va, how you remind me of my father!" -

"I don't dare disobey, O mighty ruler," Hottabych answered fawningly, touching his beard ever so often. Alas! It was still very, very damp.

Oh, how restless his soul was! All his many years' experience rose up against the fact that the owner of the palace should invite a strange old man and two young boys-all dressed in a far from elaborate fashion-to share his meal. That meant there was some mischief to be expected. Perhaps this Jafar Alt ibn Mohammed was trying to coax them into his palace in order to play a joke on them and then, having had his fill of torturing them, would order his servants to chop off their heads, or throw them into cages with wild beasts. Oh, how cautious he had to be!

So thought Hottabych as he and his young friends ascended the broad stairway to the first block of dormitories.

They encountered no one, either on the stairs or in the hall, and this but served to confirm Hottabych's suspicions. Muhammedov took them to his room, induced the old man to change into a pair of pyjamas, and left, telling them to make themselves at home. "I'll be back soon, after I give a few orders. I'll be right back."

"Aha! We know to whom you'll give those orders and what they'll be about, you crafty, two-faced ruler!" Hottabych thought. "You have a heart of stone, one that is immune to mercy. To chop off such noble boys' heads!"

Meanwhile, the noble boys were looking round the comfortable room.

"Look, d'you see this?" Volka cried happily. He picked up a small table fan, a thing Hottabych had never seen.

"It's a fan," Volka explained. "We'll dry your beard in a flash!"

True enough, in two minutes' time Hottabych's beard was ready for use.

"We'll test it," the sly old man mumbled innocently.

He yanked out two hairs. Before the crystal tinkling sound had died down, our friends suddenly found themselves about three miles away, on the warm sandy beach. At their feet, the blue-black waves of the rising tide softly lapped against the shore.

"This is much better," Hottabych said contentedly. Before the boys could utter a sound, he yanked three more hairs from his beard.

That very instant a large tray of steaming roast lamb and a second, smaller tray of fruit and biscuits appeared on the sand.

Hottabych snapped his fingers and two strange-looking bronze pitchers with sherbet appeared.

"Golly!" Zhenya cried. "But what about our clothes?"

"Alas, I am becoming forgetful before my time," Hottabych said critically and yanked out another hair. Their clothes and shoes became dry the same instant.

Moreover, their things appeared freshly pressed and their shoes shined brightly and even smelling of the most expensive shoe polish.

"And may this treacherous ruler, Jafar Alt ibn Muhammed, call for as many guards as he wishes!" the old man said with satisfaction, pouring himself a cup of icy, fragrant sherbet. "The birds have flown out from under the knife!"

"Why, he's no ruler!" Volka said indignantly. "He's a real nice man. And if you want to know, he didn't go off to call any guards, he went to get us something to eat."

"You're too young to teach me, O Volka!" Hottabych snapped, for he was really displeased that his young companions were not in the least thankful for having been saved from death's jaws. "Who but I should know what rulers look like and how they behave! Know ye, that there are no more treacherous men than sultans."

"But he's no sultan, he's a foreman. D'you understand, a drilling foreman!"

"Let's not argue, O Volka," the old man answered glumly.

"Don't you think it's time we sat down to eat?"

"What about your pyjamas?" Zhenya said, seeing that they could not out-talk the old man this time. "You've carried off someone else's pyjamas!"

"Oh, Allah! I've never yet degraded myself by stealing," Hottabych cried unhappily.

If all the people at the sanatorium were not then in the dining hall, they probably would have seen a pair of striped pyjamas appear suddenly in the dark sky, coming from the direction of Matsesta, flying at the height of the third-storey windows. The pyjamas flew into Muhammedov's room through the open balcony doors and draped themselves neatly over the back of the chair, from which the kind drilling foreman had so recently picked them up and handed them to a shivering Hottabych.

Muhammedov, however, forgot all about the old man and the boys before he even reached the dining hall.

"I found them," he said to his room-mate. "I found both towels. We left them on the bench when we sat down to rest."

Then he joined the others at the table and applied himself to his supper.

IT'S SO EMBARRASSING TO BE AN ILLITERATE GENIE!

Before Muhammedov had a chance to start on his dessert, the clouds that our travellers had left somewhere between Tuapse and Sochi finally reached the spa and burst forth in a loud, torrential, sub-tropical storm.

In a moment the streets, parks and beaches became deserted.

Soon the storm reached the spot where, by Hottabych's grace, the small crew of the drowned magic carpet were to spend the night on the shore of the Black Sea.

Luckily, they noticed the approaching storm in time; the prospect of getting drenched to the bone again did not appeal to them in the least. However, the most important thing to keep dry was the old man's beard. The simplest thing to do would have been to fly somewhere farther south, but in the pitch darkness of the southern night they might easily crash into a mountain.

For the time being, they took refuge under some bushes and considered where to go.

"I've got it!" Zhenya cried, jumping to his feet. "Golly, what an idea! We should smear his beard with oil!"

"And then what?" the old man shrugged.

"Then it won't even get wet in another Flood, that's what!"

"Zhenya's right," Volka agreed, feeling a bit peeved that it was not he who had thought of such a wonderful, scientifically sound idea. "Hottabych, go into action!"

Hottabych yanked out several hairs, tore one of them in two, and his beard became covered with a thin layer of excellent palm oil.

Then he tore a second hair in two and they all found themselves in a comfortable, marble-faced cave that suddenly appeared on the steep bank. And

while a warm June storm was booming loudly over the Caucasian coast, they sat on thick carpets, had a plentiful dinner and then fell asleep soundly till morning.

They were awakened by the soft whispering of the crystal-clear waves.

The sun had long since risen.

Stretching and yawning, they went out onto the deserted beach, bathed in the slanting rays of the morning sun. Immediately, as if it had never existed, the cave that had sheltered them for the night disappeared.

The boys were splashing delightedly in the cool waves when they heard the far-off hum of an airplane motor coming from the direction of Adler Airport.

A large passenger plane with glistening silver wings was flying over the sea.

"Ah-h!" Zhenya sighed dreamily. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could go to Moscow in that plane?"

"That's not a bad idea at all," Volka agreed.

Thereupon Hottabych drew something very thin and white from his pocket. It resembled a delicate silver thread. He tore it into several pieces and suddenly all three of them found themselves in comfortable reclining seats inside the airplane.

The most surprising thing was that none of the passengers paid the slightest attention to them, as if they had been aboard the plane right from the start.

"Hottabych," Zhenya whispered. "What was it you tore that looked just like a silver thread?"

"Just a little hair from my beard," Hottabych replied, though he seemed strangely embarrassed.

"But you took it from your pocket."

"I tore it out of my beard beforehand and hid it in my pocket, just ... in case.... Forgive me, but I wasn't sure my oiled beard would stay dry."

"Don't you believe in science?" Zhenya cried in amazement.

"I am quite well versed in the sciences," Hottabych said in a hurt voice, "but I don't know what kind of a science teaches you to protect a magic beard from getting wet by oiling it." To change the subject he said, "How comfortable and speedy this air chariot is! At first, I thought we were inside a tremendous and truly unusual iron bird and was indeed surprised."

All conversation stopped at this point, because the old man became just a tiny bit air-sick. Rather, he was very tired. He dozed off in his seat and did not open his eyes until they were quite near Moscow. Beneath them was the great Moscow Sea.

Volka, who was sitting beside him, whispered proudly, "My uncle made this sea."

"This sea?"

"Yes."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes."

"You mean to say that you're Allah's nephew?" the old man sounded very sad.

"My uncle's an excavator operator. He's in charge of a walking excavator. His name's Vladimir Nekrasov. If you want to know, he's digging the Kuibyshev Sea right now."

"My, oh my! You most blessed one!" Hottabych said turning an angry red. "I so believed you, O Volka! I respected you so! And suddenly you tell such horrid, shameful lies!"

"Is Vladimir Nekrasov really your uncle?" the stocky man with a broad, weather-beaten face sitting behind them asked loudly. "Is he really?"

"He's my mother's cousin."

"Why didn't you say so before!" the man exclaimed. "The boy's got such a man for an uncle, and he doesn't say a thing! Why, he's a rare man, indeed! I'm on my way back from the Kuibyshev Sea right now. We're working on the same sector. Why, if you want to know, we...."

Volka nodded towards a gloomy Hottabych.

"But he doesn't believe my uncle made the Moscow Sea."

"Ai-ai-ai, citizen. That's not nice at all!" the man began to shame Hottabych. "How can you doubt it? Vladimir Nekrasov dug that sea and now he's digging another, and if a third sea has to be dug, he'll dig that one, too! What's the matter? Don't you read the papers? Here, have a look. Right here. This is our paper." He pulled a newspaper from his battered brief-case and pointed to a photograph. "See?"

"Look! That's my uncle!" Volka shouted. "Can I have this paper? I want to give it to my mother."

"Take it, it's yours," the man said. "Do you still doubt him?" he asked Hottabych, who now seemed very small. "Here, read the heading: 'Our Wonderful Sea-Builders.' It's all about his uncle."

"Is it about you, too?" Zhenya asked.

"It's mostly about Nekrasov. I'm not famous. Here, read it."

Hottabych took the paper and pretended to read. Really now, he couldn't admit he didn't know how to read, could he?

That is why, on the way home from the airport, he asked his young friends to teach him how to read and write, for he said he had nearly died of shame when the man had asked him to read the words "Our Wonderful Sea-Builders."

They agreed that at the very first opportunity they would teach him how to read the papers, because the old man was very insistent that he begin

with them. Nothing else would do.

"So's I'll know which sea is being built, and where," he explained, looking away shyly.

WHO'S THE RICHEST?

"Let's go for a walk, O crystal of my soul," Hottabych said the next day.

"On one condition only, and that's that you won't shy away from every bus like a village horse. But I'm insulting village horses for nothing. They haven't shied away from cars in a long, long time. And it's about time you got used to the idea that these aren't any Jirjises, but honest-to-goodness Russian internal combustion engines."

"I hear and I obey, O Volka ibn Alyosha," the old man answered timidly.

"Then repeat after me: I will never again be afraid of...."

"I will never again be afraid of...."

". . . buses, trolley-buses, trolley-cars, trucks, helicopters...."

"... buses, trolley-buses, trolley-cars, trucks, helicopters...."

"... automobiles, searchlights, excavators, typewriters...."

"... automobiles, searchlights, excavators, typewriters...." "... gramophones, loud-speakers, vacuum-cleaners...." "... gramophones, loud-speakers, vacuum-cleaners...." "... electric plugs, TV-sets, fans and rubber toys that squeak.'

"... electric plugs, TV-sets, fans and rubber toys that squeak." "Well, I guess that takes care of everything," Volka said. "Well, I guess that takes care of everything," Hottabych repeated automatically, and they both burst out laughing.

In order to harden the old man's nerves, they crossed the busiest streets at least twenty times. Then they rode on a trolley-car for a long while and, finally, tired but content, they boarded a bus.

They rode off, bouncing softly on the leather-upholstered seats.

Volka was engrossed in a copy of Pionerskaya Pravda, the children's newspaper. The old man was lost in thought and kept glancing at his young companion kindly from time to time. Then his face broke into a smile, evidently reflecting some pleasant idea he had conceived.

The bus took them to the doorstep. Soon they were back in Volka's room.

"Do you know what, O most honourable of secondary school pupils?" Hottabych began the minute the door closed behind them. "I think you should be more aloof and reserved in your relations with the young inhabitants of your house. Believe it or not, my heart was ready to break when I heard them shouting:

'Hey, Volka!' 'Hello, Volka!' and so forth, all of which is obviously

unworthy of you. Forgive me for being so outspoken, O blessed one, but you have slackened the reins unnecessarily. How can they be your equals when you are the richest of the rich, to say nothing of your other innumerable qualities?"

"Huh! They certainly are my equals. One boy is even a grade ahead of me, and we're all equally rich."

"No, you are mistaken here, O treasure of my soul!" Hottabych cried delightedly and led Volka to the window. "Look, and be convinced of the truth of my words."

A strange sight met Volka's eyes.

A few moments before, the left half of their tremendous yard had been occupied by a volley-ball pitch, a big pile of fresh sand for the toddlers, "giant steps" and swings for the daring, exercise bars and rings for athletics fans, and one long and two round bright flower-beds for all the inhabitants to enjoy.

Now, instead of all this, there towered in glittering magnificence three marble palaces in an ancient Asiatic style. Great columns adorned the facades. Shady gardens crowned the flat roofs, and strange red, yellow and blue flowers grew in the flower-beds. The spray issuing from exotic fountains sparkled like precious stones in the sunlight. Beside the entrance of each palace stood two giants holding huge curved swords. Volka and Hottabych went down to the yard. At the sight of Volka, the giants fell to their knees as one and greeted him in thunderous voices, while terrible flames escaped their mouths. Volka shuddered.

"May my young master not fear these beings, for these are peaceful Ifrits whom I have placed at the entrance to glorify your name."

The giants again fell to their knees and, spitting flames, they thundered obediently, "Order us as you wish, O mighty master!"

"Please get up! I do wish you'd get up," Volka said in great embarrassment. "Why do you keep falling on your knees all the time? It's just like feudalism. Get up this minute, and don't you ever let me catch you crawling like this. Shame on you! Shame on both of you!"

Looking at each other in dismay, the Ifrits rose and silently resumed their previous stand of "attention."

"Well now!" Volka mumbled. "Come on, Hottabych, let's have a look at your palaces." He skipped up the steps lightly and entered the first palace.

"These are not my palaces, they are your palaces," the old man objected respectfully as he followed Volka in.

However, the boy paid no attention to his words.

The first palace was made entirely of rare pink marble. Its heavy carved sandalwood doors were studded with silver nails and adorned with silver stars and bright red rubies.

The second palace was made of light blue marble and had ten doors of rare ebony studded with gold nails and adorned with diamonds, sapphires and emeralds.

In the middle of the second palace was the mirror-like surface of a large pool, the home of goldfish the size of sturgeon.

"That's instead of your little aquarium," Hottabych explained shyly. "I think this is the only kind of aquarium in keeping with your great dignity."

"Hm, imagine picking up one of those fishes. It'll bite your hand off," Volka thought.

"And now, do me the honour of casting a kindly glance at the third palace," Hottabych said.

They entered the portals of the third palace. It glittered so magnificently that Volka gasped:

"Why, it's just like the Metro! It's just like the Komsomolskaya Station!"

"You haven't seen it all yet, O blessed one!" Hottabych said quickly.

He led Volka out into the yard. Once again the giants "presented arms," but Hottabych ignored them and pointed to the shining golden plaques adorning the entrances to the palaces. On each the same words were engraved, words which made Volka both hot and cold at the same time:

"These palaces belong to the most noble and glorious of youths of this city, to the most beautiful of the beautiful, the most wise of the wise, to him who is replete with endless qualities and perfections, the unmatched and unsurpassed scholar in geography and other sciences, the first among divers, the best of all swimmers and volley-ball players, the unchallenged champion of billiards and ping-pong-to the Royal Young Pioneer Volka ibn Alyosha, may his name be glorified for ages to come as well as the names of his fortunate parents."

"With your permission," Hottabych said, bursting with pride and happiness, "I wish, when you come to live here with your parents, that you appoint me a corner, too, so that your new residence will not separate us and I may thus have the opportunity at all times to express my deep respect and devotion to you."

"In the first place, these inscriptions aren't very objective," Volka said after a short pause, "but that's not the most important thing in the long run. It's not important, because we'll have to hang up new signs."

"I understand you and cannot but blame myself for being so short-sighted," the old man said in an embarrassed tone. "Naturally, the inscriptions should have been made in precious stones. You are most worthy of it."

"You misunderstood me, Hottabych. I wanted the inscriptions to read that these palaces belong to the RONO. (District Department of Education.)"

You see, in our country all the palaces belong to the RONO, or to the sanatoriums."

"Which RONO?"

Volka misunderstood Hottabych's question.

"It doesn't matter which, but I'd rather it belonged to the Krasnopresnensky RONO. That's the district I was born in, that's where I grew up and learned how to read and write."

"I don't know who that RONO is," Hottabych said bitterly, "and I'm quite ready to believe that he is a worthy person. But did RONO free me from my thousands of years of imprisonment in the vessel? No, it was not RONO, it was you, O wonderful youth, and that is why these palaces will belong to you alone and no one else."

"But don't you see...."

"I don't want to! They are yours or no one's!"

Never before had Volka seen Hottabych so angry. His face was purple and his eyes were flashing. The old man was obviously trying hard to keep his temper.

"Does that mean you don't agree, O crystal of my soul?"

"Of course not. What do I need these palaces for? What do you think I am, a clubhouse, or an office, or a kindergarten?"

"Ah-h-h!" Hottabych sighed unhappily and shrugged. "We'll have to try something else then!"

The palaces became hazy, swayed, and dissolved into thin air, like a fog blown by the wind. The giants howled and shot upwards, where they, too, disappeared.

A CAMEL IN THE STREET

Instead, the yard suddenly filled with heavily laden elephants, camels and mules. New caravans kept arriving constantly. The shouts of the dark-skinned drivers, dressed in snow-white robes, blended with the elephants' trumpeting, the camels' snorting, the mules' braying, the stamping of hundreds of hooves and the melodious tinkling of bells.

A short sunburnt man in rich silk robes climbed down from his elephant, approached the middle of the yard, and tapped the pavement thrice with his ivory cane. Suddenly, a huge fountain appeared. Immediately drivers carrying leather pails formed a long queue; soon the yard was filled with the snorting, chomping and wheezing of the thirsty animals.

"All this is yours, O Volka," Hottabych cried, trying to make himself heard above the din. "Won't you please accept my humble gift?"

"What do you mean by 'all this'?"

"Everything. The elephants, and the camels, and the mules, and all the gold and precious stones they carry, and the people who are accompanying them-everything is yours!"

Things were going from bad to worse. Volka had nearly become the owner of three magnificent but quite useless palaces, and now he was to be the owner of a vast fortune, an owner of elephants and, to top it all-a slave-owner!

His first thought was to beg Hottabych to make all these useless gifts disappear before anyone had noticed them. But he immediately recalled how things had gone with the palaces. If he had been smarter, he probably would have been able to talk the old man into letting the city keep them.

He had to stall for time to think and map out a plan of action.

"You know what, Hottabych?" he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "What do you say if we go for a ride on a camel, while the men take care of the caravan?"

"It would really be a pleasure," answered the unsuspecting old man.

A moment later, a double-humped camel appeared on the street, swaying majestically and looking round with an arrogant air. On its back were an excited Volka and Hottabych, who felt quite at home and was fanning himself lazily with his hat.

"A camel! A camel!" the children shouted excitedly. They had poured out into the street in great numbers, just as if they had all been waiting for the camel to appear.

They surrounded the unruffled animal in a close circle, and it towered over them like a double-decker bus towers over an ice-cream cart. One of the little boys was skipping and shouting:

They're coming
on a camel!

They're coming
on a camel!

The camel approached the crossing just as the light turned red. Since it was not used to traffic rules, it coolly stepped across the white line with the word "STOP!" written in large letters in front of it. In vain did Volka try to hold it back. The camel continued on its way, straight towards the militia man who was quickly pulling out his receipt book for fines.

Suddenly a horn blared, brakes screeched and a light blue car came to a stop right under the steely-nerved camel's nose. The driver jumped out and began yelling at the animal and its two passengers. And true enough, in another second there would have been a terrible accident.

"Kindly pull over to the curb," the militia man said politely as he walked up to them.

Volka had great difficulty in making the camel obey this fatal order. A crowd gathered immediately, and everyone had an opinion to offer:

"This is the first time I've seen people riding a camel in Moscow."

"Just think, there could have been a terrible accident!"

"What's wrong with a child going for a ride on a camel?"

"No one's allowed to break traffic rules."

"You try and stop a proud animal like that. That's no car, you know!"

"I can't imagine where people get camels in Moscow!"

"It's obviously from the zoo. There are several camels there."

"It makes me shiver to think what could have happened. He's an excellent driver!"

"The militia man is absolutely right."

Volka felt he was in a jam. He hung down over the camel's side and began to apologize:

"It'll never happen again! Please let us go! It's time to feed the camel. This is a first offence."

"I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do about it," the militia man replied dryly. "They always say it's the first time in cases like this."

Volka was still attempting to soften the stern man's heart when he felt Hottabych tugging at his sleeve.

"O my young master, it makes me sad to see you lower yourself in order to shield me from any unpleasantness. All these people are unworthy of even kissing your heels. You should let them know of the chasm that separates them from you."

Volka waved the old man away impatiently, but all at once he felt as he had during the geography examination: once again he was not the master of his own words.

He wanted to say:

"Please, won't you let us go? I promise never to break any traffic rules as long as I live."

Instead of this humble plea, he suddenly bellowed at the top of his voice:

"How dare you, O despicable guard, detain me during the precious hour of my promenade! On your knees! On your knees immediately, or I'll do something terrible to you! I swear by my beard-I mean, by his beard!" And he nodded towards Hottabych.

At these words, Hottabych grinned smugly and stroked his beard fondly.

As concerns the militia man and the crowd, the child's insolence was so unexpected that they were more dumbfounded than indignant.

"I am the most outstanding boy in this whole city!" Volka kept on

shouting, inwardly wishing he were dead. "You're unworthy of even kissing my heels! I am handsome! I am wise!"

"All right," the militia man answered darkly. "They'll see just how wise you are down at the station."

"Goodness! What nonsense I'm saying! It's really hooliganism!" Volka thought and shuddered. Nevertheless, he continued:

"Repent, you, who have dared to spoil my good spirits! Cease your insolence before it's too late!"

Just then, something distracted Hottabych's attention. He stopped whispering to Volka and for a few moments the boy was once again on his own. As he hung down over the side of the camel and looked at the crowd pathetically he began to plead:

"Citizens! Dear people! Don't listen to me. Do you think it's me talking? It's him, this old man, who's making me talk like this."

But here Hottabych once again picked up the reins and in the same breath Volka screamed:

"Tremble before me and do not anger me, for I am terrible in my wrath! Oh, how fearsome I am!"

He understood only too well that his words did not frighten anyone; instead, they made some indignant, while others found them simply funny. But there was nothing he could do. Meanwhile, the crowd's feeling of surprise and indignation began to change to one of concern. It was clear that no schoolboy could ever speak so foolishly and rudely if he were normal.

Then a woman shouted, "Look! The child has a fever! Look, he's steaming!"

"What disrespect!" Volka shouted back, but, to his utter horror, he saw large puffs of black smoke escaping his mouth at every word.

People gasped, someone ran to call an ambulance, and Volka whispered to Hottabych, taking advantage of the confusion:

"Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab! I order you to take this camel and us as far away as possible. Immediately. Somewhere outside the city limits. Otherwise, we can get in very bad trouble. Do you hear me? Im-me-di-ate-ly!"

"I hear and I obey," the old man replied in a whisper.

That very instant, the camel and its riders soared into the air and disappeared, leaving everyone behind in the greatest confusion.

A moment later it landed gracefully on the outskirts of the city. There its passengers parted with it forever.

The camel is probably still grazing there. You'll recognize it at once if you see it, for its bridle is studded with diamonds and emeralds.

A MYSTERIOUS HAPPENING IN THE BANK

Despite the day's unpleasant experiences, Volka was in high spirits when he and Hottabych returned home. He had finally hit upon an idea of how to dispose of the endless treasures he had so suddenly acquired.

First, he asked Hottabych whether he could make the drivers, elephants, camels, mules and all their loads invisible.

"You need only command me to do so, and it will be done."

"Fine. Then please make them invisible for the time being, and let's go to bed. We'll have to get up at sunrise tomorrow."

"I hear and I obey!"

And so, the people who had gathered in the yard to stare at the strange and noisy caravan suddenly found the place to be completely empty. They went back to their homes in amazement.

Volka gulped down his supper, undressed and climbed into bed with a happy sigh. He only had a sheet for a cover, since it was so hot.

Hottabych, however, had decided to comply with an ancient custom Genies had. He became invisible and lay down across the threshold, to guard his young master's sleep. Hottabych was just about to begin a solemn conversation when the door opened and Volka's grandmother entered, to say good night as always. She tripped over the invisible old man and nearly fell.

"Why, something was definitely lying on the threshold!" she gasped when Volka's father came running.

"Where was that something lying?" he asked. "And what did that something look like?"

"It didn't look like anything, Alyosha."

"Mother, do you mean to tell me you tripped over an empty space?" he asked and laughed with relief, happy that she had not hurt herself.

"Yes, I guess I did," Grandma answered in bewilderment and laughed, too.

Volka's father and grandmother left.

As for Hottabych, he had wisely decided to crawl under Volka's bed-at least no one would step on him there, and he would be closer to Volka.

For several minutes no one said a word. Volka could not decide how to begin such a ticklish conversation.

"Good night!" Hottabych said amiably from under the bed.

Volka realized he had better begin.

"Hottabych," he called, hanging his head over the side of the bed, "I want to talk to you about something."

"Not about my gifts to you today?" Hottabych asked warily, and when he received an affirmative answer he sighed.

"You see, dear Hottabych, I'd like to know whether I can do as I please with your presents?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And you won't be angry at me, no matter what I do with them?"

"No, I won't, O Volka. How can I dare be angry with someone who has done so much for me?"

"If it's not too much trouble, Hottabych, could you please swear to that?"

"I swear!" Hottabych said in a hollow voice from under the bed. He understood that there must be a catch to this.

"That's fine," Volka said happily. "That means you won't feel too bad if I tell you that I have no earthly use for these presents, though I'm awfully grateful to you for them."

"O woe is me!" Hottabych moaned. "You're refusing my gifts again. But these aren't palaces! Can't you see, O Volka, I'm not giving you palaces any more. You might as well tell me the truth-that the gifts of your most devoted servant disgust you."

"Figure it out yourself, Hottabych, you're a very wise old man: now, what in the world could I do with so many treasures?"

"You could be the richest of the rich, that's what," Hottabych grumbled. "Don't tell me you wouldn't want to be the richest person in your country? Yet, it would be just like you, O most capricious and puzzling of all boys I have ever met! Money means power, money means glory, money means friends galore! That's what money means!"

"Who needs bought friends and bought glory? You make me laugh, Hottabych! What's the use of glory that's been bought, instead of earned through honest labour in your country's service?"

"You forget that money gives you the most reliable and durable power over people, O my young and stubborn arguer."

"But not in our country."

"Next thing, you'll be saying that people in your country don't want to get richer. Ha, ha, ha!" Hottabych thought this was really a cutting remark.

"Sure they do," Volka answered patiently. "A person who does more useful work makes more money. Sure, everyone wants to earn more, but only through honest work."

"Be that as it may, nothing could be further from my mind than to make my precious young friend seek dishonest earnings. If you don't need these treasures, turn them into money and lend the money out. You must agree, that's a very honourable undertaking-to lend money to those who need it."

"Why, you must be crazy! You don't know what you're talking about. How

can a Soviet person be a usurer! And even if there was such a vampire, who'd ever go to him? If a person needs money, he can ask for a loan at the Mutual Aid, or borrow some from a friend."

"Well then," a somewhat disheartened Hottabych persisted, "buy as many goods as you can and open up your own shops in every part of the city. You'll become a well-known merchant and everyone will respect you and seek your favour."

"Don't you understand, the Government and the co-operatives are in charge of all trade? Why, making a profit by selling stuff in your own shop...."

"Hm!" Hottabych pretended to agree. "Supposing it is as you say it is. I hope you think creating goods is an honest occupation?"

"Sure it is! See, you're beginning to understand!" Volka said happily.

"I am extremely pleased." Hottabych smiled sourly. "I recall you once said that your greatly respected father was a foreman in a factory. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"Is he the most important man in the factory?"

"No. He's a foreman, but there's a shop foreman, and a chief engineer, and a director above him."

"Well then," Hottabych concluded triumphantly, "you can use the treasures I've given you to buy your excellent father the factory he works in and lots of other factories besides."

"It belongs to him already."

"Volka ibn Alyosha, you just said..."

"If you want to know, he owns the factory he works in and all the other factories and plants, and all the mines and the railways, and the land and the water, and the mountains and the shops and the schools, and the universities and the clubs, and the palaces, and the theatres, and the parks, and the movies in the country. And they belong to me and to Zhenya Bogorad, and to his parents, and...."

"You wish to say that your father has partners, don't you?"

"Yes, that's what it is-partners. About two hundred million partners. As many as there are people in the country."

"You have a very strange country, one that I cannot understand at all," Hottabych mumbled from under the bed and said no more.

At sunrise the next day the ringing of a telephone awakened the District Branch Manager of the State Bank. He was urgently being summoned to the office. Worried by such an early phone call, he dashed to his office and, upon entering the yard of the building in which the branch was located, he saw a great number of heavily-laden elephants, camels and mules.

"There's someone here who wants to make a deposit," the night watchman

said in dismay.

"A deposit?" the manager repeated. "So early in the morning? What kind of a deposit?"

The watchman handed him a sheet of paper torn from a school notebook. It was covered with a firm, childish scrawl. The manager read the paper and asked the watchman to pinch him. The puzzled man did as he was told. The manager winced, looked at the page again and said:

"Impossible! It's absolutely incredible!"

A person who wished to remain anonymous was giving the State Bank two hundred and forty-six bags of gold, silver and precious stones, valued at three thousand four hundred and sixty-seven million, one hundred and thirty-five thousand, seven hundred and three roubles and eighteen kopeks, to use as it saw fit.

The most amazing thing happened a moment later. First, the animals which had delivered the treasure, then, the people who had driven the animals, and then, the treasures they had brought began to sway; they became transparent and dissolved in the air, just like steam. A fresh morning breeze tore the sheet of paper from the amazed manager's hand, whipped it high into the air and carried it off into an open window. It was Volka Kostylkov's room. As he slept soundly, the page was fitted back into the notebook it had recently been torn from and once again became a clean piece of paper.

But that is not all. Strange as it may seem, neither the people at the branch office of the bank, nor Volka's neighbours, nor Volka himself ever remembered anything at all about the event afterwards. It was as if someone had erased it from their memories completely.

HOTTABYCH AND SIDORELLI

It was pitiful to look at the old man. He spent the whole day in the aquarium, saying that he was having an attack of rheumatism. This was certainly a foolish excuse, for nothing can be sillier than sitting in cold water if you have rheumatism.

Hottabych lay on the bottom of the aquarium, moving his fins sluggishly and swallowing water lazily. When either Volka or Zhenya approached, the old man would swim off to the far side and rudely turn his tail towards them. However, whenever Volka left the room, Hottabych would get out of the water to stretch his legs; but as soon as he'd hear him approaching, he'd dash back into the aquarium with a soft splash, as though he had never thought of leaving it. He apparently found some bitter pleasure in the fact that Volka

kept pleading with him to get out of the water and stop sulking. The old man would listen to all his entreaties with his tail turned towards the boy. Yet the moment his young friend would open his geography book and begin to study for his exam, Hottabych would stick his head out of the aquarium and accuse Volka of having no heart at all. How could he be occupied with all sorts of nonsense, when an old man was suffering so from rheumatism?!

No sooner would Volka close his book, however, than Hottabych would again turn his tail towards him. This went on till evening. At a little after seven o'clock, he swished his tail and hopped out on to the floor. He squeezed the water from his beard and moustache and dried them quickly at the buzzing table fan. Then he said with some reserve:

"You hurt me by refusing to accept my humble gifts. It's your good luck that I promised you I wouldn't get angry. But I did promise and, therefore, I'm not angry at you, for I now see who is really responsible for your offending me so, though you do it unconsciously. It is your teachers-they are the root of all evil! Varvara Stepanovna, not you, O youthful and inexperienced boy, will be held fully responsible for all the bitterness of the past few days. And now that undeserving Varvara, daughter of Stepan, will...."

He yanked four hairs at once from his beard. Something extraordinary was about to happen.

"Oh, no! No, Hottabych! Dear, dear Hottabych!" Volka babbled as he hung on the angry Genie's arms. "My word of honour! Varvara Stepanovna's not at all to blame! It was only me..."

"No! She's to blame, she's to blame!" Hottabych droned, trying to free his hands.

"She's not to blame! She's not to blame! Upon my word of honour, she's not to blame!" Volka repeated in a frightened voice, while feverishly trying to think of a way to distract the raging Genie's attention from his teacher. "You know what? You know what?" He had finally thought of something: "Let's go to the circus. Huh, Hottabych? Let's go to the circus! Zhenya and I will never get tickets, but it's so easy for you to get them. You're the only one who can help us get into the circus. You're so powerful, so amazingly all-powerful!"

The old man was very inquisitive and an easy prey to flattery. Most important, unlike all other Genies, he never remained angry long.

"And what does this funny word mean?" Hottabych's eyes burned with interest. "Is it a market where they sell parrots and other unusual birds? Then, know ye, that I am completely indifferent to birds. I've had my fill of the sight of parrots."

"Oh, no, this is a thousand times more interesting. Why, it's a million times, a million million times more interesting!"

Hottabych immediately forgot about Varvara Stepanovna.

"Let's go there on a camel. No, better still, on an elephant. Just imagine how everyone will envy you."

"No, don't bother. I don't want you to go to all that trouble," Volka objected with suspicious haste. "If you're not afraid, let's go on the trolley-bus."

"What's there to be afraid of?" the old man sounded offended. "Why, I've been looking at these iron carts for four days now without any fear at all."

Half an hour later, Volka, Zhenya and Hottabych reached the recreation park and approached the entrance to the summer circus.

The old man ran over to the box-office to have a look at the tickets, and soon he, Volka and Zhenya were holding pink tickets.

They entered the brightly-lit big top.

There were three empty seats in one of the boxes right near the arena, but Hottabych was quite vigorous in refusing them.

"I cannot agree to having anyone in this place sitting higher than myself and my greatly respected friends. It would be below our dignity."

It was no use arguing with the old man. With heavy hearts the boys climbed to the last row of the second balcony.

Soon attendants in crimson and gold uniforms lined up along both sides of the entrance to the arena.

The ring-master announced the first act. A bare-back rider dressed in a sequined suit and looking like a Christmas tree ornament rode into the ring.

"Do you like it?" Volka asked Hottabych.

"It is not devoid of interest, and it is pleasant to the eye," the old man replied cautiously.

The bare-back rider was followed by acrobats, who were followed by clowns, who were followed by a dog act-this attraction met with Hottabych's reserved praise-who were followed by jugglers and spring-board jumpers. Then there was an intermission.

It was a shame to leave and miss the second half of the show, but a geography book opened at the very first chapter awaited Volka at home.

He sighed heavily and whispered to Zhenya, "Well, I guess I'll be going. But you try and keep him here for at least another two hours. Go for a walk with him after the show, or something...."

Zhenya mumbled softly, but with great emphasis:

"We should all three leave, all three of us. V. S. is here! V. S. is here!"

And he nodded towards the side isle.

Volka turned round and froze: Varvara Stepanovna and her five-year-old granddaughter Irisha were making their way down the isle to the foyer.

As if by agreement, the boys jumped to their feet and stood in front of the unsuspecting old man in a way to shield their teacher from him.

"You know what, Hottabych?" Volka choked. "Let's go home! Huh? There's nothing of interest here today."

"Sure," Zhenya agreed, trembling like a leaf in his fear for Varvara Stepanovna's life. "That's right, let's go home. We'll walk in the park and all kinds of things...."

"Oh, no, my young friends!" Hottabych answered innocently. "Never before have I been so interested as I am in this truly magic tent. I'll tell you what: you run along and I'll return as soon as this amazing performance ends."

What an idea-to leave Varvara Stepanovna alone with a Genie who hated her so!

They had to think of something, of anything at all, to occupy him during intermission. Once the performance was resumed, his eyes would be glued on the arena. They had to think of something urgently, but, fearing for Varvara Stepanovna's very life, Volka was completely at a loss. His teeth even began to chatter. This attracted Hottabych's attention, for he was interested in everything.

"I tell you, Hottabych," Zhenya came to the rescue, "it's either one way or the other: either we study or not!"

Both Volka and Hottabych looked at him in bewilderment.

"What I mean is, since we've promised Hottabych to teach him to read and write, we should use every free minute for study. Isn't that right, Hottabych?"

"Your perseverance is worthy of the greatest praise, O Zhenya," Hottabych answered. He was really touched.

"Well, if that's the case, here's the circus programme. Let's sit right down and learn the alphabet. We'll study all through intermission...."

"With happiness and pleasure, O Zhenya."

Zhenya opened the programme and pointed to the first letter "A" he saw.

"This is the letter 'A,' understand?"

"Yes, O Zhenya."

"Now, what letter did I say it was?"

"It's the letter 'A,' O Zhenya."

"Right. Now find me all the 'A's you can on this page."

"Here's a letter 'A,' O Zhenya."

"Fine! Do you see any more?"

"Here, and here, and here, and here, and here...."

Hottabych was so engrossed in his studies that he paid no attention at all to anything else. By the time the intermission was over and the audience had returned to its seats, Hottabych had learned the alphabet and was

reading in syllables:

"An ac-ro-bat on a spring ... board."

"D'you know, Hottabych, you really are gifted!" Zhenya said with true amazement.

"What did you think?" Volka replied. "Why, there has never been such a talented Genie in all the world."

Hottabych read on delightedly: " 'Jum-ping ac-ro-bats un-der the di-rec . . . di-rec-tion of Phil-lip Bel-ykh.' We saw that already. 'Ev-en-ing per-for-man-ces beg-in at 8 p.m. Ma-ti-nees at 12 no-on.' O my young teachers, I have read the entire programme. Does that mean I'll now be able to read the newspapers, too?"

"Certainly! Sure you will!" the boys said. "Now let's try to read the greetings hanging over the orchestra pit," Volka said.

Just then a young lady in a little white apron carrying a large tray appeared.

"Would you care for some ice-cream?" she asked the old man. He looked at Volka questioningly.

"Take some, Hottabych, it's very nice. Try it!" Hottabych tried it and he liked it. He bought some for the boys and another portion for himself, then a third and, finally, being carried away, he bought the astounded young lady's entire supply-forty-three bars of ice-cream covered with delicate frost. The girl said she'd be back later for the tray and went off, turning back to look at the strange customers.

"Oho!" Zhenya winked. "Look at him pack it away." In the space of five minutes' time, Hottabych had gulped down all forty-three bars. He ate it as one would eat a cucumber, biting off big chunks and chewing loudly. He swallowed the last mouthful just as the performance began.

"A world-famous act! Presenting Afanasy Sidorelli!" The audience applauded and the band played a loud viva. A short, middle-aged man in a blue silk robe embroidered with gold dragons entered the arena, bowing and smiling in all directions. It was the famous Sidorelli himself. While his assistants laid out his props on a small lacquered table, in preparation for the first magic trick, he continued to bow and smile. A gold tooth glittered in his mouth when he smiled.

"It's wonderful!" Hottabych whispered enviously. "What's wonderful?" Volka asked, clapping as loud as he could.

"It's wonderful to see a person who has gold teeth growing in his mouth."

"You think so?" Volka asked absently as he watched the first trick.

"I am positive," Hottabych replied. "It's very beautiful and rich looking."

Sidorelli completed the trick.

"Did you see that?" Volka asked Zhenya proudly, as if he himself had done the trick.

"It was swell!" Zhenya answered. Volka gasped: Zhenya now had two rows of gold teeth in his mouth.

"Volka! Oh, Volka!" Zhenya whispered in a frightened voice. "I want to tell you something-but don't get scared. All your teeth are made of gold."

"It's all Hottabych's doing, I know," Volka said dejectedly.

And true enough, the old man, who was listening in on their conversation, nodded and smiled guilelessly. Then they saw that he, too, had two rows of large, even gold teeth.

"Even Sulayman, the Son of David (peace be on the holy twain!), did not have such a luxurious mouth!" he boasted. "But don't bother thanking me. I assure you that you are both worthy of this small surprise."

"Don't worry, we're in no rush to thank you!" Zhenya muttered.

Volka was afraid the old man might get angry and he tugged his friend's sleeve. Zhenya said no more.

"You see, Hottabych," he began diplomatically, "it'll be awfully obvious if all three of us sitting in a row have gold teeth. Everybody will look at us, and we'll feel embarrassed."

"I won't be embarrassed in the least," Hottabych said.

"But still, we won't feel right. There won't be any pleasure in being at the circus."

"So?"

"Well, we wanted to ask you to make our teeth plain bone again till we get home."

"I am perfectly awed by your modesty, O my young friends!" the old man said in a somewhat hurt voice.

It was a relief to feel that once again they had their own teeth in their mouths.

"Will they turn gold again when we get home?" Zhenya whispered anxiously.

"Never mind, we'll find out later. Maybe the old man will forget about them."

Once again Volka became absorbed watching Afanasy Sidorelli's breath-taking magic. He applauded together with the rest when the man pulled a pigeon, a hen, and, finally, a bouncy, fluffy white poodle from an empty box.

There was only one man present who showed no sign of appreciation as he watched the magician. This was Hottabych.

He felt very hurt, because everyone was applauding the magician for all sorts of trifles, while he, who had performed such wonderful miracles from the time he had been liberated from the vessel, had not even heard a single

sincere word of praise, let alone been applauded.

That is why, when the tent was once again filled with applause and Sidorelli began bowing to all sides, Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab grunted irritably and, despite the protests of those sitting in front, proceeded to climb over them down to the arena. An approving murmur passed through the crowd and a stout man said to his neighbour: "I told you that the old man was one of them. You can tell he's a very experienced clown. Look how funny he is. Sometimes they sit in with the audience on purpose."

Fortunately for the man, Hottabych heard nothing of what he said, as he was engrossed in watching the magician. Sidorelli was about to begin his most difficult trick.

First of all, the famous illusionist set fire to several long coloured ribbons and stuffed them into his mouth. Then he picked up a large, brightly coloured bowl filled with something that looked like sawdust. He stuffed his mouth full of the sawdust and began to fan himself quickly with a beautiful green fan. The sawdust in his mouth began to smoulder. Then a wisp of smoke appeared and, finally, when the lights were turned out, everyone saw thousands of sparks and even a small flame shoot from the famous magician's mouth.

Then, amidst a storm of applause and shouts of Bravo! Hottabych's indignant voice could be heard.

"It's a fake!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "That's no magic! It's simple sleight-of-hand!"

"Isn't he something!" someone shouted.

"A wonderful clown! Bravo, clown!" And everyone present except Volka and his friend applauded Hottabych enthusiastically.

The old man did not understand which clown they were shouting about. He waited for the applause he had inspired to die down and continued acidly:

"What kind of magic is that! Ha, ha, ha!"

He shoved the thunderstruck magician aside. To begin with, fifteen tremendous multi-coloured flames shot from his mouth; they were so real that a smell of burning filled the circus.

The applause was balm to Hottabych's heart. Then he snapped his fingers, and instead of one large Sidorelli, seventy-two tiny Sidorellis ran off in single file along the barrier surrounding the arena. After completing several circles, they blended into one large Sidorelli again, just as tiny drops of mercury roll together to form a large drop.

"That's not all!" Hottabych thundered in a voice that was no longer human. He was excited by the admiration he had aroused, and began to draw forth herds of horses from under the flaps of his jacket.

The horses whinnied with fear, they pawed the ground and tossed their heads, making their lovely silken manes blow. Then, at a signal from the old

man, the horses disappeared. Instead, four huge, roaring African lions jumped out from under his jacket. They raced around the arena several times and also disappeared.

There was an unending storm of applause from that moment on.

Hottabych waved his hand and everything on the arena- Sidorelli and his assistants, and his various props, and the elegant uniformed attendants-all shot into the air, completed several farewell circles over the heads of the astounded audience, and dissolved into nothing.

Suddenly and from nowhere, a huge African elephant with sly, twinkling eyes appeared on the arena. On its back was an elephant of smaller size; on the second was a third, still smaller; on the third was a fourth. . . the seventh and smallest of all stood right under the top of the tent and was no bigger than a dog.

They trumpeted in unison, their trunks raised on high; then all flapped their ears like wings and flew off.

The band of thirty-three musicians-all shouting happily- suddenly became a single ball; it rolled down from the bandstand into the arena and along the barrier, getting smaller and smaller until it was no larger than a pea. Then Hottabych picked it up, put it in his right ear, and the muffled sounds of a march could be heard coming from within.

The old man was really bouncing up and down from excitement. He snapped all ten fingers at once and in a very special way, and everyone present began to shoot up from their seats, one at a time, and disappear far under the big top.

Finally, only three people remained in the empty circus: Hottabych, who had wearily sat down to rest on the barrier, and the two boys, who had rushed down to him from the last row.

"Well, how was it?" Hottabych asked limply, raising his head with difficulty and looking at the boys from strangely glazed eyes. "That's no Sidorelli for you, is it?"

"He's certainly no match for you," Volka replied, winking at Zhenya angrily, because his friend kept trying to ask the old man something.

"I can't stand fakers," Hottabych muttered with unexpected bitterness. "To pass off simple sleight-of-hand for miracles! And in my presence!"

"But he didn't know a wise and mighty Genie was present here," Zhenya put in a word for the magician. "And anyway, he didn't say he was performing miracles. In fact, he didn't say anything at all."

"It says so there. It says so in the programme. You heard me read it: 'Miracles of Illusion.' "

"Well, but of illusion, il-lu-sion! Don't you understand?"

"How they applauded me!" the old man recalled delightedly. "But you, O

Volka, have never applauded nor even approved of me. No, I'm wrong. There was one occasion. But it was on account of some very simple magic. I don't even consider it magic.

And that evil Varvara Stepanovna is blame. It was she who taught you to scorn my gifts! Do not argue, O my young friends! It was she, it was she! Such wonderful palaces! Such a lovely little caravan! Such devoted and healthy slaves! Such excellent camels! And it was all because of that evil Varvara Ste..." but here, luckily for the teacher and our young friends, Hottabych's gaze fell on a long banner hanging over the bandstand. His glazed eyes, once again took on an intelligent expression; a weak smile appeared on his face and, with the satisfaction of one who has just learned to read, he pronounced aloud:

"De-ar child-ren! Con-gra-tu-la-tions on fi-ni-shing the sch-ool term. We wish you...."

The old man fell silent and closed his eyes. It seemed as if he were about to lose consciousness.

"Could you bring everyone back to their seats?" Volka asked anxiously. "Hottabych, can you hear me? D'you hear me? Can you make everything as it was before? I bet it's very hard to do, isn't it?"

"No, not at all. I mean, it's not hard for me to do at all," Hottabych answered in a barely audible whisper.

"I don't think even you can do it," Volka said craftily.

"Yes, I can, but I feel very tired."

"See, that's what I said! You can't do it."

At this, Hottabych rose up with a sigh. He yanked thirteen hairs from his beard, tore them to bits, and shouted a strange and very long word. Then he sank down onto the sawdust covering the floor. From high under the circus tent enraptured people came whizzing down, and each one to his own seat. Sidorelli and his assistants, the props and the uniformed attendants, headed by the imposing ring-master, appeared on the arena as from under the ground.

Flapping their ears loudly, all seven African elephants came flying back. They landed and formed a pyramid again, only this time the smallest one was on the bottom and the big one with the twinkling eyes on top, right under the roof. Then the pyramid they formed fell apart and they rushed around the arena in single file, getting smaller and smaller until they were no bigger than the head of a pin; finally, they got lost in the sawdust.

The orchestra rolled out of Hottabych's right ear like a pea; it mushroomed into a huge pile of laughing people and, contrary to the law of gravity, rolled upwards to the bandstand, where it fell apart into thirty-three men. They took their seats and began to play a march.

"Let me through, please! Let me through!" a thin man in large horn-rimmed glasses said, as he made his way through the excited crowd

standing around Hottabych. "Won't you be so kind as to drop in at the manager's office? He'd like to talk to you about performing in Moscow and on a road tour," he said deferentially.

"Leave the old man alone," Volka told him unhappily. "Can't you see he's sick? He's got a high fever!"

And true enough, Hottabych was really burning up. He had got sick from eating too much ice-cream.

A HOSPITAL UNDER THE BED

He who has never had to take care of a sick Genie cannot imagine what a tiring and bothersome affair it is.

First of all, there arises the question of where to keep him. You can't put him in a hospital, and there's no question of keeping him in bed at home, where everyone can see him.

Then again, how does one cure a Genie? Modern medicine is useful when one deals with people, not fairy-tale magicians.

And, finally, can people catch Genies' diseases?

The boys discussed these problems at great length as they rode home in a cab with a delirious Hottabych.

They came to the following decisions:

1. They would not take him to a hospital, but keep him as comfortable as possible under Volka's bed, suggesting first that, for safety's sake, he become invisible.

2. They would treat him as they would a person who had a cold. They would give him aspirin and tea with raspberry jam before going to sleep to make him perspire.

3. Genies' diseases could not possibly be catching.

Fortunately, no one was at home. They made Hottabych comfortable in his usual place under Volka's bed.

Zhenya ran off to buy some aspirins and raspberry jam, while Volka went to the kitchen to make some tea.

"Well, tea's ready!" he said cheerfully, entering the room with a boiling kettle. "Let's have some tea, Hottabych. Hm?"

There was no answer.

"He's dead," Volka gasped and suddenly, despite all the unpleasantness Hottabych had caused him, he felt he would miss the old man terribly if he died. "Dear, dear Hottabych!" he babbled, crawling under the bed.

The old man was not there.

"What a crazy old man!" Volka said angrily, forgetting all his tender

feelings. "He was here a moment ago, and now he's disappeared!"

There is no telling what bitter words Volka would have added if Zhenya had not then dashed into the room, dragging a balky Hottabych behind. The old man was mumbling something.

"What a nut! You can't imagine what a nut he is!" Zhenya shouted as he helped Volka settle Hottabych under the bed again. "I was coming back from the shop and there he was, standing on the corner with a sack of gold, trying to hand it out to passers-by. I asked him, 'What are you doing here with a high fever?' And he said, 'I feel my days are counted. I want to hand out alms on this occasion.' And I said, 'You're nuts! Whom are you going to give alms to? Did you see any beggars here?' And he said, 'If that's the case, I'll go back home.' So I dragged him back. You just lie still and get well! There's no use rushing death!"

They gave Hottabych a mouthful of aspirins, then fed him the whole jar of raspberry jam with tea, and bundled him up tightly to make him perspire.

For a while, the old man lay there quietly. Suddenly, he began to fuss, trying to get up. He said he was going to Sulayman, the Son of David, to ask forgiveness for some long-forgotten ill deeds. Then he began to cry and asked Volka to run down to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean and find a copper vessel on the bottom in which his dear brother Omar Asaf ibn Hottab was imprisoned. He wanted Volka to free him and bring him back home.

"We'd all live so happily here!" he mumbled deliriously with bitter tears pouring down his cheeks.

Half an hour later the old man came to his senses and said in a weak voice from under the bed:

"Oh, my young friends, you cannot imagine how grateful I am for your love and precious attention! Will you please do me a last favour: bind my hands tightly, because I'm afraid I might do such magic while unconscious that I'll never be able to undo it later."

They tied him up and he immediately fell soundly asleep.

Next morning Hottabych awoke in the prime of health.

"That's what medical attention administered in time can do!" Zhenya said with satisfaction. Then and there he decided to be a doctor when he grew up.

ONE IN WHICH WE RETURN TO THE BARKING BOY

To tell the truth, each time Volka thought of Goga, he became terribly envious. If he was at home or on the stairs, or downstairs near the entrance, it was difficult not to think of Goga:

ever so often a teasing, wonderful, marvellous barking could be heard-even through closed doors and closed windows.

It was most strange, however, that Goga did not come outside. No other boy in his place could ever have been able to stay away so long and not boast to his friends about his real, pure-breed puppy. And Goga, especially, would have gloated to see the children so envious.

There was something strange about it all. Finally, Volka could not keep from asking Goga's mother what the matter was. She became terribly embarrassed and mumbled something about her dear boy being sick. Then she rushed off.

"Wait a minute!" Volka pleaded. "Can I ask you something? Just one question?"

Goga's mother stopped reluctantly.

"Can you just tell me if it's an Alsatian? Is it?"

"What Alsatian?" the poor woman shrugged.

"The puppy you gave Goga. You know, the one that's barking. Is it an Alsatian or a Boxer?"

"Goodness, what nonsense!" she sighed and disappeared quickly into her apartment.

As if for spite, a high-pitched angry barking issued forth.

It was all very mysterious.

Just then Hottabych, who was lying in his usual place under Volka's bed, asked casually:

"I wonder how your enemy named Pill is getting on?"

He yearned to boast about the cunning spell he had cast on him and share with Volka his delight in the trouble Goga was deservedly having.

"No one but I can ever break the spell," he thought. "I can just imagine how the most greatly-respected Volka ibn Alyosha will be pleased and how amazed he will be at the endless variety of my powers."

"Pill?" Volka repeated absently, for he had just thought of a very simple and tempting idea. "Pill? He's not feeling too good. Listen, Hottabych," he crouched down and stuck his head under the bed, in order to carry on negotiations more comfortably. "I want to ask you for a big favour."

"This is it," the old Genie thought unhappily. He suspected that Volka was about to ask him to break the spell he had cast on Goga; and he decided to refuse flatly. At least for the time being. It wouldn't hurt the horrid tattle-tale and gossip to suffer a bit. It would only do him good. However. Hottabych replied sourly:

"I'll be only too happy to know your wish."

"I want to ask you for a present."

The old man was pleased at not being forced to discuss Goga's premature

pardon. He scurried out from under the bed.

"Just tell me what you want and you'll have it immediately, O young and benevolent Genie-saviour."

"Could you give me a dog? An Alsatian?"

"A dog? Nothing could be simpler or more pleasing to my heart!"

Hottabych yanked a hair from his beard. Volka felt faint from happiness: there, at his feet, a magnificent, sleek and muscular three-year-old Alsatian stretched with a pleasant growl. It had lively, intelligent eyes, a cold, wet nose and marvellous pointed ears. Volka patted its neck. The dog wagged its tail politely and barked loudly from an overflow of emotion.

"How do you like this dog?" Hottabych asked, as he bustled about, ready at a sign from Volka to fill the entire room, the entire apartment, and the entire house with the most valuable dogs. "Oh, I beg your pardon. I forgot a small detail."

The "small detail" was a collar, which appeared immediately. It glittered with such a multitude of precious stones that there would be more than enough for two imperial crowns.

The unexpected happiness was almost more than Volka could bear. He patted the dog with a shaking hand and had such a dazed smile on his face that tears of happiness rolled down the kind-hearted old man's cheeks.

But there can never be complete happiness in life, at any rate, not when you are dealing with a Genie's gifts! Suddenly, they heard the clicking of a woman's heels behind the door. No sooner had Hottabych darted under the bed, there to become invisible, than the door opened and Volka's mother entered.

"That's just what I thought," she said, looking at the animal. In his haste, the old Genie had forgotten to make it invisible. "A dog! I'd like to know where you got it?" Volka knew he was sinking fast and sure. "I got it.... It was given to me... . You see.... What I mean is...."

There was no sense telling her the truth, and Volka didn't want to lie. Anyway, there was no sense lying-his mother could always tell when he was not telling the truth.

"Volka!" she said, raising her voice, "I don't like your mumbling. I want you to tell me whose dog it is."

"It isn't anyone's ... I mean, it wasn't anybody's before, but now it's mine."

His mother turned pink with indignation. "I didn't think you would lie to me. I didn't think you were capable of it. Tell me whose dog it is. Why, the collar alone is worth hundreds of roubles."

She thought the stones were just coloured glass. Hottabych became very angry. He was both angry and hurt. He wanted this noble, but naive woman to

understand that Has-san Abdurrahman ibn Hottab was not one to present his best friends with cheap imitations and that this truly priceless collar was worth thousands upon thousands of roubles. But he checked himself in time, since he now realized such bragging would only make Volka's situation worse.

He himself was a straightforward and truthful person and was proud of Volka for not wanting to lie, even though it was the tiniest white lie. The only thing to do was to stop the misunderstanding immediately.

"Well then, my kind and truthful young friend will have to do without a dog for the time being. And let him not be bothered by dreams of owning a dog," Hottabych thought, smiling into his beard.

A faint crystal tinkling issued from under the bed, and the dog disappeared.

"Volka, dear," his mother said, completely forgetting what they had been talking about. "If my office calls, please tell them I'll be there in an hour or so. By the way, do you know whom the doctor came to see next door?"

"Goga, I guess."

"Is he ill?"

"I think so." -

"You think so! Isn't he your friend?"

"Some friend!"

"I'm ashamed of you, Volka," his mother said angrily, and she turned and walked out of the room with a stony face.

"Hm!" Volka sighed and decided to visit Goga as soon as the doctor left. "Hottabych! Hey, Hottabych!"

There was no answer.

"He's gone again! Whenever you have to discuss something with him, he's not there. What a Genie!"

Meanwhile, Hottabych was making himself comfortable in apartment 37, this time under Goga's bed. He was curious to see how the old doctor, who obviously had no idea what a mighty and unusual opponent he was up against, would helplessly fumble about in search of a correct diagnosis.

This is what was happening in the room where the most mysterious of all the old district doctor's cases lay high on fluffed pillows, while Volka, taking advantage of Hottabych's absence, sat down to study his geography, and the old Genie himself lay hidden under Goga's bed.

The old doctor's name was Alexander Alexeyevich. We want you to know this, in case you meet him some day. He was very experienced and wise.

"Now, will you please leave us alone? There's something we have to discuss," he said kindly to Goga's despairing mother.

"Well, young man," he said when they were alone (Hottabych under the bed obviously did not count), "how are things? Are we still barking?"

"It's awful!" Goga moaned.

"Aha! Well then, let's just chat a bit. What kind of poems do you like?"

"Bow-wow-wow!" Goga barked. His mother, who was standing just outside the door, began to sob.

You can imagine what Goga wanted to reply to the old doctor's question! He was indignant and he considered it a foolish and unnecessary question. However, his barking neither surprised nor distressed the old doctor.

"Don't get angry," Alexander Alexeyevich said in a very calm voice. "This question has direct bearing on your illness."

"I like 'A Winter's Evening,' a poem by Pushkin," Goga finally answered after barking for a long while.

"Won't you recite it for me? Do you know it by heart?"

Goga recited four lines.

"That's enough!" the doctor said. "Now, will you please tell me what you think about your classmate, ah, what's-his-name? The one who lives next door?"

"You mean Volka Kostylkov?"

"Exactly."

"Bow-wow-wow!" Goga barked loudly.

"Now, now. Try to use words."

"Bow-wow-wow'." Goga replied, shrugging helplessly, as if to say: "I'd be only too glad to use words, but I can't. I don't seem to be able to."

"I see. That's enough. That's enough, I said! Hm! Well, and what about the other children in your class?"

"In my class?" the ailing Goga smirked. "If you want to know, all the kids in my class are bow-wow-wow!"

"Well, and what do you think about me? Don't be shy, tell me what you really think. What do you think of me as a doctor?"

"As a doctor, I think you're nothing but a bow-wow-wow!"

"Wonderful!" Alexander Alexeyevich exclaimed with genuine joy. "And what do you think about your mother?"

"My mother's very nice," Goga said. His mother, still standing behind the door, burst out in tears, though these were tears of happiness. "But sometimes she's bow...." He shuddered and fell silent. "No, she's always very, very nice."

"And what about your class wall-newspaper? Do you have anything to say about it?" the old doctor asked, but this time only to be doubly certain. He had finally discovered the essence of the rare illness his young patient was suffering from. "Did they ever criticize you in the paper?"

This time Goga kept on barking for at least two minutes. Hottabych was tired of listening to him, but the old doctor was so delighted that one

would think it was not Goga Pilukin, nicknamed "Pill" for his atrocious temper, barking, but an opera star singing his most famous aria.

When Goga had barked his fill, Alexander Alexeyevich rubbed his hands together contentedly.

"It seems quite clear now. But let us not be hasty and, instead, put it to the test again. Here's my pen and a sheet of paper. I want you to write: 'There is no place in our country for gossips and tattle-tales!' Have you written it? Excellent! Let me see it. You have written it nicely and without a single mistake. Now let's write another sentence. By the way, what's your teacher's name? Varvara Stepanovna? Well then, write this: 'Varvara Stepanovna! Vanya and Petya are purposely teaching me to swear. I'm a conscientious boy and wish you would punish them.'"

Goga's face became terribly sour. Something was obviously wrong. He kept writing and crossing out what he had written, until the doctor finally took the messy sheet of paper away. This is what he read, chuckling, but apparently not a bit surprised:

"Varvara Stepanovna! Vanya and Petya bow-wow-wow.... I'm a conscientious boy and wish you would bow-wow-wow." Each of these "bow-wow-wow's" was crossed out, but each time the unfortunate Goga had written in another "bow-wow-wow" over the one that had been crossed out.

"The committee's findings are clear," the doctor said, folding the two papers and putting them away in his wallet. "Please come in!" he called to Goga's mother..

She entered, dabbing her eyes with a damp hanky.

After she had sat down, Alexander Alexeyevich said, "I have to inform you that I didn't sleep a wink last night, because I was busy looking through my medical books and thinking. I could find nothing at all which even vaguely resembled your son's case."

The poor woman gasped nervously.

"Do not despair, my good woman," the old doctor said. "Things are not hopeless. I read on and on, and thought a great deal. And after that I naturally could not fall asleep, for I'm getting on in years. Seeking distraction, I picked up a volume of Arabian Nights and read a tale about a magician or, rather, a Genie, changing a person he disliked into a dog. Then I thought that if there really were Genies in the world (Hottabych lying under the bed was offended) and if one of them decided to punish someone, say a boy, for gossiping, tattling, and thinking poorly of his friends, he could cast a spell on him that would make him bark each time he wanted to say something bad. Your son and I just had a long talk and we discovered that he could recite a poem by Pushkin without barking at all and speak of you with hardly a small bark, and then bark incessantly when talking of his friends or the school newspaper, in which he had apparently been criticized

several times. Do you understand what I'm getting at? I do hope I've made myself clear."

"Do you mean," Goga's mother said thoughtfully, "that..."

"Exactly. Naturally, there aren't any Genies and there never were any. (Hottabych again felt hurt, this time even more than before.) What your son has is a very strange kind of psychological trauma. And I must warn you that he will continue barking in the future...."

"Oh my goodness!" the poor woman wailed.

"Yes, he will bark each time he decides to tattle or gossip, or whenever he tries to say something unpleasant. And then people will no longer call him Goga Pilukin, but Bow-Wow Pilukin. And this will continue when he grows up, although no one will call him that to his face. As you see, your son may find himself in a very unhappy situation. However, if he makes a firm resolution never to tattle, gossip, or spoil good people's lives, I can guarantee you that he will stop barking once and for all."

"Bow-Wow Pilukin!" Goga's unfortunate mother thought and shuddered. "How horrible! I would never survive it. But what about some medicine? Won't you at least write out a prescription for some medicine?"

"In this case, no medicine will help. Well, young man, shall we give it a try?"

"And I won't bark at all any more?"

"Everything depends entirely on you."

"Then you won't leave a prescription?" Goga's mother asked again, seeing that the doctor was about to leave.

"I gave you my prescription, the only one that will work. However, we can check on it. Now, won't you say a few fair words about your friend Volka? I want you to pay special attention: I said 'fair.'"

"Sure, Volka Kostylkov's a good fellow," Goga mumbled hesitantly, as if he were just learning how to talk. "You're right dear, dear doctor! This is the first time since the geography exam that I didn't bark when I talked about Volka! Hurray!"

"Exactly what happened at the exam?" the old doctor asked, as if casually.

"Why, nothing special. Can't a boy suddenly become ill from overwork?" Goga went on in a much more confident tone.

"I guess I'll be going along," Alexander Alexeyevich said. "I have to visit a good dozen real patients. I take it you understood everything, Goga?"

"Yes! Oh, yes! Upon my word of honour! Thank you!"

"Well, then, keep it up! Good-bye, everyone."

"Where'd you disappear to?" Volka shouted at the old Genie several seconds later, as Hottabych crawled back to his place under his bed with a

very thoughtful expression-on his face.

"Listen, 0 Volka," the old man said with great solemnity. I just witnessed a most unusual scene: a spell cast by a Genie was broken by a human being! True, this was a very wise and very just human being. He was so just that I didn't even think of punishing him for not believing in my existence. Where are you going?

"I have to visit Goga. I should really be ashamed of myself."

"Yes, do go and visit your classmate. Though he is no longer ill."

"Not ill at all? Did he get well so quickly?"

"That depends entirely on him," Hottabych said. And pocketing his own pride, he told Volka about the only known case of curing a boy who barked.

HOTTABYCH AND MR. MONEYBAGS

"0 blessed Volka," Hottabych said as he basked happily in the sun after breakfast, "each time I present you with gifts which I consider of great value I discover they are the wrong kind of gifts. Perhaps it would be a better idea if you were to tell me what you and your young friend would care for. I would consider it a great honour and joy to fulfil your wish on the spot."

"If that's the case, would you please give me a pair of large navy binoculars?" Volka said promptly.

"With the greatest of pleasure and joy."

"I'd like a pair of binoculars, too. I mean, if it's all right with you," Zhenya added shyly.

"Nothing could be simpler."

The three of them set out for a large second-hand shop, located on a busy little side street in the centre of the city. The shop was crowded and our friends had difficulty in pushing their way to the counter. There were so many odd items on the shelves that they could never be sorted according to any system, for then there would have to be a separate section for each item.

"Show me, 0 sweet Volka, what these binoculars so dear to your heart look like," Hottabych said happily but then suddenly turned pale and began to tremble.

He looked at his young friends sadly, burst into tears and said in a hollow voice, "Farewell, 0 light of my eyes!" Then, shoving the people in the shop aside, he headed towards a grey-haired ruddy-complexioned foreigner and fell to his knees before the man.

"Order me as you will, for I am your obedient and humble slave!" Hottabych mumbled, swallowing his tears and trying to kiss the flap of the foreigner's jacket.

"Shame on you, citizen, to go begging in our times!" one of the shop assistants said to Hottabych.

"And so, how many I should have pay you for this bad ring?" the foreigner continued nervously in bad Russian, after being interrupted by Hottabych.

"Only ten roubles and seventy kopeks," the clerk answered "It certainly is an odd item."

The clerks of second-hand shops knew Mr. Moneybags well though he had but recently arrived from abroad as a touring businessman. He spent all his free time combing the second-hand shops in the hope of acquiring a treasure for a song.

"Quite recently he had bought half a dozen china cups of the Lomonosov Pottery very cheaply and now, just when an inconsolable Hottabych had fallen to his knees before him, he was pricing a time-blackened ring which the clerk thought was made of silver and Mr. Moneybags thought was made of platinum.

When he received his purchase he put it in his vest pocket and left the shop. Hottabych rushed out after him, wiping the tears that poured down his wrinkled old face. As he passed his friends, he barely had time to whisper:

"Alas! This grey-haired foreigner holds the magic ring of Sulayman, the Son of David (on the twain be peace!). And I am the slave of this ring and must follow its owner. Farewell, my friends. I'll always remember you with gratitude and love...."

Only now, when they had parted with Hottabych forever, did the boys realize how used to him they had got. They left the shop in silence without even looking at any binoculars and headed towards the river bank, where, as of late, they were wont to sit long hours having heart-to-heart talks. They lay on the bank for a long time, right near the place where such a short while ago Volka had found the slimy clay vessel with Hottabych. They recalled the old man's funny but endearing ways and became more and more convinced that, when all was said and done, he had had a very pleasant and kind nature.

"There's no use denying it. We didn't appreciate Hottabych enough," Zhenya said critically and heaved a sigh.

Volka turned on his other side and was about to reply, but instead he jumped to his feet quickly and ran off.

"Hurrray! Hottabych is back! Hurrray!"

And true enough, Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab was approaching them in a quick old man's shuffle. Dangling over his shoulder on long straps were

two black leather cases containing large naval binoculars.

HASSAN ABDURRAKHMAN IBM HOTTAB'S STORY OF HIS ADVENTURES AFTER LEAVING THE SHOP

"Know ye, O my young friends, that my story is strange and my adventures most unusual. I want you to sit beside me while I tell you how I came to be here again.

"It so happened, that when the ruddy-faced foreigner left the shop, he continued on foot, in order to shake off a little of the fat that covers his well-fed body so plentifully. He walked so quickly that I was barely able to keep up with him. I caught up with him on another street and fell down before him crying, 'Order me to follow you, O my master!'

"But he would not listen and continued on his way. I caught up with him eighteen times in all and eighteen times I fell on my knees before him and eighteen times he left me where I was.

"And so we continued on until we came to his house. I wanted to follow him in, but he shouted, 'You do not push into my rooms or I will be calling a militia man!' Then I asked him whether I was to stand by his door all day and he replied, 'Till next year if you want to!'

"And I remained outside the door, for the words of one who possesses Sulayman's ring are law to me. And I stood there for some time until I heard a noise overhead and the window opened. I looked up and saw a tall thin woman in a green silk dress standing by the window. Her laugh was bitter and taunting. Behind her stood the same foreigner who now looked extremely put out. The woman said derisively, 'Alas, how mistaken I was when I married you fourteen years ago! You always were and always will be a very ordinary haberdasher! My goodness, not to be able to tell a worthless silver ring from a platinum one! Oh, if only my poor father had known!'

"And she tossed the ring down on the pavement and shut the window with a bang. I saw this and dropped senseless to the ground, for if Sulayman's ring is thrown to the ground terrible calamities may occur. But then I opened my eyes and became convinced that I was alive and nothing unfortunate had happened. I gathered from this that I can consider myself lucky.

"Then I jumped to my feet and blessed my fate. I picked up the ring and ran back to you, my friends, having previously procured the presents you so desired. That's all I have to say."

"It's just like in a fairy-tale," Zhenya cried excitedly when the old man had finished his story. "Can I hold the magic ring a little?"

"Of course! Put it on the index finger of your left hand. Then turn it and say your wish out loud. It will be fulfilled immediately."

"Golly!" Zhenya said, putting on the ring. He turned it and said in a loud voice, "I want a bicycle right now!" All three held their breaths in expectation. However, no bicycle appeared.

Zhenya repeated still louder, "I want to have a bicycle immediately! This very minute!"

But the bicycle just wouldn't appear.

"Something must have gone wrong with the ring," Volka said, taking it from Zhenya and looking at it closely. "Look, there's something written inside. It's written in Russian!" he said and read aloud: "Wear this, Katya, and remember me. Vasya Kukushkin, May 2, 1916."

THE SAME AND MR. MONEYBAGS

"Anyone can make a mistake," Volka said magnanimously, looking at a confused Hottabych with sympathy. "I'm glad the ring has turned out to be a plain ordinary one. And thanks a lot for the presents."

The boys turned away tactfully, took their binoculars from the leather cases and began enjoying their wonderful presents. The far-off houses came right up to the river, tiny dots turned into walking people, and a car speeding down the road seemed about to knock the happy owner of a pair of binoculars off his feet. One could not even dream of bigger enlargement.

"Hottabych," Volka said several minutes later, "here, have a look at who's coming towards us." He handed his binoculars over to Hottabych, who had already discerned Mr. Harry Moneybags in person walking rapidly towards them. In fact, he was running, huffing and puffing from his great weight.

When Mr. Moneybags noticed that he was being watched he slowed down and continued on nonchalantly, as if he were in no hurry at all, as if he were merely strolling along to get away from the city noises. When he came up close, his red face contorted into a sickeningly sweet smile and he said:

"Oh, my goodness! How pleasant and unexpected meetings!"

As he approaches our friends to shake their hands enthusiastically, we shall explain why he has again appeared in our story.

It so happened that Mrs. Moneybags was in a black temper that day, and that is why she tossed the ring out of the window so hastily. After she had tossed it out, she remained standing at the window to calm her nerves. It was then that she noticed with interest an old man picking the ring up from the gutter and dashing off as fast as he could.

"Did you see that?" she said to her crestfallen husband. "What a funny old man! He grabbed up that cheap ring as if it had an emerald in it and scampered off."

"Oh, that was a very bothersome old man!" her husband answered in a more lively tone. "He came up to me back in the second-hand shop and hung on to me right to our doorstep, and just imagine, my dear, he kept falling to his knees before me and shouting, 'I am your slave, because you have Sulayman's ring!' and I said, 'Sir, you are greatly mistaken. I have just bought this ring and it belongs to no one but me.' But he was stubborn as a mule and kept on saying, 'No, it's Sulayman's ring! It's a magic ring!' And I said, 'No, it's not a magic ring, it's a platinum one!' And he said, 'No, my master, it's not platinum, it's a magic ring!' and he pretended he wanted to kiss the flap of my jacket."

His wife gazed at him with loathing and then, apparently unable to stand his smug expression, she looked away. Her eyes came upon a copy of Arabian Nights lying on the couch. Suddenly she was struck by an idea. Mrs. Moneybags collapsed into the nearest armchair and whispered bitterly:

"My God! How unlucky I am to be obliged to live with such a man! Someone with your imagination, Sir, should be an undertaker, not a businessman. A lizard has more brains than you!"

"What's the matter, my dear?" her husband asked anxiously.

"Gentlemen," Mrs. Moneybags wailed tragically, though there was no one save themselves in the room. "Gentlemen, this man wants to know what's the matter! Sir, will you be kind enough to catch up with the old man immediately and get the ring back before it's too late!"

"But what do we want it for? It's a cheap little silver ring, and a home-made one at that."

"This man will surely drive me to my grave! He keeps asking me why I want King Solomon's magic ring! Gentlemen, he wants to know why I need a ring that can fulfil one's any wish, that can make one the richest and most powerful man in the world!"

"But, my dove, where have you ever seen a magic ring before?"

"And where have you ever seen anyone in this country fall on his knees before another and try to kiss his hand?"

"Not my hand, my sweet, my jacket!"

"All the more so! Will you please be so kind as to catch up with the old man immediately and take back the ring! And I don't envy you if you come back without it!"

Such were the events which caused the red-faced husband of the terrible Mrs. Moneybags to appear so suddenly before Hottabych and his friends.

Had Mr. Moneybags been in Hottabych's place, he would never have returned the ring, even if it were an ordinary one, and especially so if it were a magic one. That is why he decided to begin from afar.

"Oh, my goodness! How happy and unexpected surprise!" he cried with so sweet a smile that one would think he had dreamed of becoming their friend

all his life. "What a wonderful weather! How you feel?"

Hottabych bowed silently.

"Oh!" Mr. Moneybags exclaimed with feigned surprise. "I see on your finger one silver ring. You give me look at this silver ring?"

"With the utmost of pleasure," Hottabych answered, extending his hand with the ring on it.

Instead of admiring the ring, Mr. Moneybags suddenly snatched it off Hottabych's finger and squeezed it onto his own fleshy finger.

"I thanking you! I thanking you!" he wheezed and his already purple face became still redder, so that Hottabych feared Mr. Moneybags might even have a stroke.

"You have buy this ring someplace?"

He expected the old man to lie, or at least to try every means possible to get back the almighty ring. Mr. Moneybags sized up the skinny old man and the two boys and decided he would be more than a match for them if things took a bad turn.

However, to his great surprise the old man did not lie. Instead, he said quite calmly:

"I did not buy the ring, I picked it up in the gutter near your house. It is your ring, O grey-haired foreigner!"

"Oh!" Mr. Moneybags exclaimed happily. "You are very honest old man! You will be my favourite servant!"

At these words the boys winced, but said nothing. They were interested to know what would follow.

"You have very good explained to me before that this ring is magic ring. I can actually have fulfil any wish?" Hottabych nodded. The boys giggled. They decided that Hottabych was about to play a trick on this unpleasant man and were ready to have a good laugh.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" Mr. Moneybags said. "You will be explaining how I use magic ring."

"With the greatest of pleasure, O most ruddy-faced of foreigners!" Hottabych answered, bowing low. "You take the magic ring, put it on the index finger of your left hand, turn it and say your wish."

"And it has to by all means come true?"

"Exactly."

"Most different various kind of wish?"

"Any wish at all."

"Ah, so?" Mr. Moneybags said with satisfaction and his face at once became cold and arrogant. He turned the ring around quickly and shouted to Hottabych, "Hey, you foolish old man! Coming here! You be packing my moneys!"

His insolent tone enraged Volka and Zhenya. They moved a step forward

and were about to open their mouths to reprimand him, but Hottabych waved them away angrily and approached Mr. Moneybags.

"Begging your pardon, sir," the old man said humbly. "I don't know what kind of money you mean. Show me some, so I know what it looks like."

"Cultured man must know how moneys look," Mr. Moneybags muttered.

And taking a foreign bill from his pocket, he waved it in front of Hottabych and then put it back.

Hottabych bowed.

"And now. Now is time to begin business," said Mr. Moneybags. "Let me have now one hundred bags of moneys!"

"You have a long wait coming!" Volka snickered and winked at Zhenya.

"That Mr. Moneybags has got his teeth into the magic ring. 'Wear it, Katya, and remember me.' "

"Let me have immediately coming one thousand bags of moneys," Mr. Moneybags repeated.

He was disappointed: the money did not appear. The boys watched him with open malice.

"I can't see moneys! Where is my one thousand bags of moneys?" Mr. Moneybags bellowed and immediately fell senseless to the ground, having been struck by a huge sack which dropped out of the blue.

While Hottabych was bringing him back to his senses, the boys opened the sack.

One hundred carefully tied bags of money were stuffed in side. Each bag contained one hundred bills.

"What a funny ring!" Zhenya muttered unhappily. "It won't even give a decent person a bike, but this character gets hundred bags of money just for nothing! That sure is some 'Wear it, Katya, and remember me,' for you!"

"It sure is strange," Volka shrugged.

Mr. Moneybags opened his eyes, saw the bags of money; jumped to his feet, counted the bags and saw that there were exactly one hundred of them. However, his happy smile soon vanished. No sooner had his shaking hands tied the valuable sack than his eyes once again began to glitter greedily.

He pressed the sack to his fat chest, turned the ring around again and shouted heatedly:

"One hundred bags is little! I want immediately one million! Right away now!"

He barely had time to jump aside when a huge sack weighing at least ten tons crashed to the ground. The force of the crash split the canvas sack and a million bags of money spilled out on the grass. Each bag contained a hundred bills.

These bills in no way differed from real money, except for the fact that they all had the same serial number. This was the number Hottabych had

seen on the bill the greedy owner of the magic ring had shown him.

Mr. Moneybags would certainly have been grieved to discover this, for any bank-teller would have noticed that all the numbers were the same, and that would mean it was counterfeit money. However, Mr. Moneybags had no time to check the serial numbers just now. Pale from excitement, he climbed to the top of the precious pile and stood up to his full height like a monument, like a living embodiment of greed. Mr. Moneybag's hair was dishevelled, his eyes burned with insane fire, his hands trembled and his heart thundered in his breast.

"And now ... and now... and now I want ten thousand gold watches strewn with diamonds, twenty thousand gold cigarette cases, thirty ... no, fifty thousand strings of pearls, fifteen thousand antique China services!" he shouted darting back and forth in order to dodge the great treasures falling from all sides.

"O red-faced foreigner, don't you think what you have received is enough?" Hottabych asked sternly.

"Silence!" Mr. Moneybags yelled and stamped his feet in rage. "When the boss do business, the servant must silence! Ring, do as my wish is! Fast!"

"Go back where you came from, you old grabber!" Volka shouted. "Out of our country! We'll propel you out of here!"

"May it be so," Hottabych agreed and yanked four hairs from his beard.

That very moment the sacks of money, the crates of china, watches and necklaces, everything the silver ring had brought- disappeared. Mr. Moneybags himself rolled down the grass and along the path very quickly, heading in the direction from which he had recently come so full of hopes. In no time he was gone with just a little puff of dust to show where he had been.

After the boys had regained their composure and calmed down, Volka said in a thoughtful tone, "I can't understand what sort of a ring it is-a plain one or a magic one?"

"Why, a plain one, of course," Hottabych answered kindly.

"Then why did it fulfil that robber's wishes?"

"It was I who fulfilled them, not the ring."

"You? Why?"

"It was just a matter of politeness, O curious youth. I felt indebted to the man, because I bothered him in the shop and annoyed him on the way home, right up to his very doorstep. I felt it wouldn't be fair not to fulfil a few of his wishes, but his greed and his black soul turned my stomach."

"That's right!"

When they left the river bank and walked along the street, Hottabych stepped on a small round object. It was the ring with the inscription: "Wear

it, Katya, and remember me," which Mr. Moneybags must have lost as he rolled away.

The old man picked it up, wiped it with his huge, bright-blue handkerchief, and put it on his right small finger.

The boys and the old man came home, went to bed and woke up the next morning, but Mr. Moneybags was still rolling and rolling away home to where he had come from.

EXTRA TICKETS

On a bright and sunny summer day our friends set out to see a football game. During the soccer season the entire population of Moscow is divided into two alien camps. In the one are the football fans; in the other are those queer people who are entirely indifferent to this fascinating sport.

Long before the beginning of the game, these first stream towards the high entrance gates of the Central Stadium from all parts of the city.

They look upon those who are heading in the opposite direction with a feeling of superiority.

In turn, these other Muscovites shrug in amazement when they see hundreds of crowded buses and trolley-buses and thousands of cars crawling through the turbulent sea of pedestrian fans.

But the army of fans which appears so unified to an onlooker is actually torn into two camps. This is unnoticeable while the fans are making their way to the stadium. However, as they approach the gates, this division appears in all its ugliness. It suddenly becomes evident that some people have tickets, while others do not. The possessors of tickets pass through the gates confidently; the others dart back and forth excitedly, rushing at new arrivals with the same plaintive plea: "D'you have an extra ticket?" or "You don't have an extra ticket, do you?"

As a rule, there are so few extra tickets and so many people in need of them, that if not for Hottabych, Volka and Zhenya would have certainly been left outside the gates.

"With the greatest of pleasure," Hottabych murmured in reply to Volka's request. "You'll have as many as you need in a minute."

No sooner were these words out of his mouth, than the boy saw him holding a whole sheaf of blue, green and yellow tickets. "Will this be enough, O wonderful Volka? If not, I'll...." He waved the tickets. This gesture nearly cost him his life. "Look, extra tickets!" a man shouted, making a dash for him. A few seconds later no less than a hundred and fifty excited people were pressing Hottabych's back against the concrete fence.

The old man would have been as good as dead if not for Volka. He ran to a side and shouted at the top of his voice:

"Over here! Who needs an extra ticket? Who needs some extra tickets?"

At these magic words the people who had been closing in on a distraught Hottabych rushed towards Volka, but the boy darted into the crowd and disappeared. A moment later he and his two friends handed the gate-keeper three tickets and passed through the North Gate to the stadium, leaving thousands of inconsolable fans behind.

ICE-CREAM AGAIN

No sooner had the friends found their seats, than a girl in a white apron carrying a white lacquered box approached them.

"Would you like some ice-cream?" she asked and shrieked. We must be fair. Anyone else in her place would have been just as frightened, for what answer could an ice-cream vendor expect?

In the best of cases: "Yes, thank you. Two, please." In the worst of cases: "No, thank you."

Now, just imagine that upon hearing the young lady's polite question, a little old man in a straw boater turned as red as a beet, his eyes became bloodshot and he bristled all over. He leaned over to her and whispered in a fierce voice:

"A-a-ah! You want to kill me with your foul ice-cream! Well, you won't, despicable thing! The forty-six ice-creams which I, old fool that I am, ate in the circus nearly sent me to my grave.

They have been enough to last me the rest of my life. Tremble, wretch, for I'll turn you into a hideous toad!"

At this, he rose and raised his dry wrinkled arms over his head. Suddenly a boy with sun-bleached eyebrows on his freckled face hung onto the old man's arms and shouted in a frightened voice, "She's not to blame if you were greedy and stuffed yourself with ice-cream! Please sit down, and don't be silly!"

"I hear and I obey," the old man answered obediently. He let down his arms and resumed his seat. Then he addressed the frightened young lady as follows, "You can go now. I forgive you. Live in peace and be grateful to this youth till the end of your days, for he has saved your life."

The young lady did not appear in their section again for the remainder of the afternoon.

HOW MANY FOOTBALLS DO YOU NEED?

Meanwhile, the stadium was full of that very special festive atmosphere which pervades it during decisive football matches. Loud-speakers blared. A hundred thousand people were heatedly discussing the possible outcome of the game, thus giving rise to a hum of human voices incomparable to anything else. Everyone was impatiently awaiting the umpire's whistle.

Finally, the umpire and the linesmen appeared on the emerald-green field. The umpire was carrying a ball which was to be kicked back and forth-thus covering quite a few miles on land and in the air-and, finally, having landed in one goal more times than in the other, was to decide which team was the winner that day. He put the ball down in the centre of the field. The two teams appeared from their locker rooms and lined up opposite each other. The captains shook hands and drew lots to see which team was to play against the sun. The unfortunate lot fell to the Zubilo team, to the great satisfaction of the Shaiba team and a portion of the fans.

"Will you, O Volka, consider it possible to explain to your unworthy servant what these twenty-two pleasant young men are going to do with the ball?" Hottabych asked respectfully.

Volka waved his hand impatiently and said, "You'll see for yourself in a minute."

At that very moment a Zubilo player kicked the ball smartly and the game was on.

"Do you mean that these twenty-two nice young men will have to run about such a great field, get tired, fall and shove each other, only to have a chance to kick this plain-looking leather ball around for a few seconds? And all because they gave them just this one ball for all twenty-two of them?" Hottabych asked in a very displeased voice a few minutes later.

Volka was completely engrossed in the game and did not reply. He could not be bothered with Hottabych at a time when the Shaiba's forwards had got possession of the ball and were approaching the Zubilo goal.

"You know what, Volka?" Zhenya whispered. "It's real luck Hottabych doesn't know a thing about football, because he'd surely stick his finger in the pie!"

"I know," Volka agreed. Suddenly, he gasped and jumped to his feet.

At that very moment, the other hundred thousand fans also jumped to their feet and began to shout. The umpire's whistle pierced the air, but the players had already come to a standstill.

Something unheard-of in the history of football had happened, something that could not be explained by any law of nature: twenty-two brightly

coloured balls dropped from somewhere above in the sky and rolled down the field. They were all made of top-grain morocco leather.

"Outrageous! Hooliganism! Who did this?" the fans shouted.

The culprit should have certainly been taken away and even handed over to the militia, but no one could discover who he was. Only three people of the hundred thousand-Hottabych and his two young friends-knew who was responsible.

"See what you've gone and done?" Volka whispered. "You've stopped the game and prevented the Shaiba team from making a sure point!"

However, Volka was not especially displeased at the team's misfortune, for he was a Zubilo fan.

"I wanted to improve things," Hottabych whispered guiltily. "I thought it would be much better if each player could play with his own ball as much as he wanted to, instead of shoving and chasing around like mad on such a great big field."

"Golly! I don't know what to do with you!" Volka cried in despair and pulled the old man down. He hurriedly explained the basic rules of football to him. "It's a shame that the Zubilo team has to play opposite the sun now, because after they change places in the second half it won't be in anyone's eyes any more. This way, the Shaiba players have a terrific advantage, and for no good reason at all," he concluded emphatically, hoping Hottabych would bear his words in mind.

"Yes, it really is unfair," the old man agreed. Whereupon the sun immediately disappeared behind a little cloud and stayed there till the end of the game.

Meanwhile, the extra balls had been taken off the field, the umpire totalled up the time wasted, and the game was resumed.

After Volka's explanation, Hottabych began to follow the course of the match with ever-increasing interest. The Shaiba players, who had lost a sure point because of the twenty-two balls, were nervous and were playing badly. The old man felt guilty and was conscience-stricken.

HOTTABYCH ENTERS THE GAME

Thus, the sympathies of Volka Kostylkov and Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab were fatally divided. When the first beamed with pleasure (and this happened every time a Shaiba player missed the other team's goal), the old man became darker than a cloud. However, when the Zubilo forwards missed the Shaiba goal, the reaction was reversed. Hottabych would burst out in happy laughter and Volka would become terribly angry.

"I don't see what's so funny about it, Hottabych. Why, they nearly made a point!"

"'Nearly' doesn't count, my dear boy," Hottabych would answer.

Hottabych, who was witnessing a football game for the first time in his life, did not know there was such a thing as a fan. He had regarded Volka's concern about the sun being in the Zubilo's eyes as the boy's desire for fair play. Neither he nor Volka suspected that he had suddenly become a fan, too. Volka was so engrossed in what was happening on the field that he paid not the slightest attention to anything else-and this forgetfulness of his caused all the unusual events which took place at the stadium that day.

It all began during a very tense moment, when the Zubilo forwards were approaching the Shaiba goal and Volka bent over to Hottabych's ear, whispering hotly:

"Hottabych, dear, please make the Shaiba goal a little wider when the Zubilo men kick the ball." The old man frowned.

"Of what good will this be to the Shaiba team?"

"Why should you worry about them? It's good for the Zubilo team."

The old man said nothing. Once again the Zubilo players missed. Two or three minutes later a happy Shaiba player kicked the ball into the Zubilo goal, to the approving yells of the Shaiba fans.

"Yegor, please don't laugh, but I'm ready to swear the goal post's on the Shaiba's side," the Zubilo goalie said to one of the spare players when the game had passed over to the far end of the field.

"Wha-a-at?"

"You see, when they kicked the ball, the right goal post... upon my sacred word of honour ... the right goal post... moved about a half a yard away and let the ball pass. I saw it with my own eyes!"

"Have you taken your temperature?" the spare player asked,

"Why?"

"You sure must have a high fever!"

"Humph!" the goalie spat and stood tensely in the goal.

The Shaiba players were out-manoeuvring the defence and were fast approaching the Zubilo goal.

Barn! The second goal in three minutes! And it had not been the Zubilo goalie's fault either time. He was fighting like a tiger. But what could he do? At the moment the ball was hit, the cross-bar rose of its own accord, just high enough to let it pass through, brushing the tips of his fingers.

Whom could he complain to? Who would ever believe him? The goalie felt scared and forlorn, just like a little boy who finds himself in the middle of a forest at night.

"See that?" he asked Yegor in a hopeless voice. "I th-th-th-ink I did," the spare player stuttered. "But you c-c-c-an't tell anyone, n-n-no one will

ever b-b-believe you." "That's just it, no one'll believe me," the goalie agreed sadly. Just then, a quiet scandal was taking place in the North Section. A moment before the second goal, Volka noticed the old man furtively yank a hair from his beard.

"What did he do that for?" he wondered uneasily, still unaware of the storm gathering over the field. However, even this thought did not come to Volka immediately.

The game was going so badly for the Zubilo team that he had no time to think of the old man.

But soon everything became perfectly clear.

The first half of the game was nearing an end, and it seemed that Luck had finally turned its face towards the Zubilo team. The ball was now on the Shaiba side of the field. The Zubilo men were ploughing up the earth, as the saying goes, and soon their best forward kicked the ball with tremendous force into the top corner of the Shaiba goal.

All one hundred thousand fans jumped to their feet. This sure goal was to give the team its first point. Volka and Zhenya, two ardent Zubilo fans, winked happily to each other, but immediately groaned with disappointment: it was a sure goal, but the ball smacked against the cross-bar so loudly that the sound echoed all over the stadium.

This sound was echoed by a loud wail from the Shaiba goalie: the lowered cross-bar had fouled a goal, but it had knocked him smartly on the head.

Now Volka understood all and was terrified.

"Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab," he said in a shaking voice. "What's this I see? You know both Zhenya and I are Zubilo fans, and here you are, against us! You're a Shaiba fan!"

"Alas, O blessed one, it is so!" the old man replied unhappily.

"Didn't I save you from imprisonment in the clay vessel?" Volka continued bitterly.

"This is as true as the fact that it is now day and that there is a great future ahead of you," Hottabych replied in a barely audible voice.

"Then why are you helping the Shaiba team instead of the Zubilo team?"

"Alas, I have no power over my actions," Hottabych answered sadly, as large tears streamed down his wrinkled face. "I want the Shaiba team to win."

THE SITUATION BECOMES MORE TENSE

"Just wait, nothing good will come of it!" Volka threatened.

"Be that as it may."

That very moment the Zubilo goalie slipped on an extremely dry spot and let the third ball into the goal.

"Oh, so that's how it is! You won't listen to reason, will you? All right then!" Volka jumped onto the bench and shouted, pointing to Hottabych:

"Listen; everyone! He's been helping the Shaiba team all the time!"

"Who's helping them? The umpire? What do you mean?" people began to shout.

"No, not the umpire! What has he to do with it? It's this old man here who's helping them.... Leave me alone!"

These last words were addressed to Zhenya, who was tugging at his sleeve nervously. Zhenya realized that no good would come of Volka's quarrel with Hottabych. But Volka would not stop, though no one took his words seriously.

"So you say the old man is shifting the goal posts from over here, in the North Section?" People roared with laughter. "Ha, ha, ha! He probably has a special gimmick in his pocket to regulate the goals at a distance. Maybe he even tossed all those balls into the field?"

"Sure, it was him," Volka agreed readily, calling forth a new wave of laughter.

"I bet he was also responsible for the earthquake in Chile! Ho-ho-ho! Ha-ha-ha!"

"No, he wasn't responsible for that." Volka was an honest boy. "An earthquake is the result of a catastrophic shifting of soil. Especially in Chile. And he was just recently released from a vessel."

A middle-aged man sitting behind Volka entered the conversation. Volka knew him, since they lived in the same house. He was the one who had named his cat Homych in honour of the famous goalie.

"Keep your shirt on, and don't make a fool of yourself," the man said kindly, when the laughter had died down a bit. "Stop talking nonsense and bothering us. The way things are now, it's bad enough without you adding your bit." (He was also a Zubilo fan.)

And true enough, there were still eleven long minutes left till the end of the first time, but the score was already 14:0 in favour of the Shaiba team.

Strange things kept happening to the Zubilo players. They seemed to have forgotten how to play: their tackling was amazingly feeble and stupid. The men kept falling; it was as if they had just learned how to walk.

And then the defence began to act queerly. Those old football lions began to shy away in fright as soon as they saw the ball approaching, as if it were a bomb about to explode.

Oh, how miserable our young friends were! Just think: they had

explained the rules of soccer to Hottabych to their own misfortune! What were they to do? How were they to help the unfortunate Zubilo players see justice restored? And what should they do with Hottabych? Even a scandal had proved useless. How could they at least distract the old Genie's attention from the field on which this unique sports tragedy was unfolding?

Zhenya found the answer. He stuck a copy of Soviet Sports into Hottabych's hand, saying, "Here, read the paper and see what a wonderful team you're disgracing in the eyes of the nation!" He pointed towards the heading: "An Up-and-Coming Team." Hottabych read aloud:

"The Zubilo team has improved considerably during the current season. In their last game in Kuibyshev against the local 'Krylya Sovetov'- team they demonstrated their... That's interesting!" he said and buried his nose in the paper.

The boys grinned at each other. No sooner had Hottabych begun to read, than the Zubilo men came to life. Their forwards immediately proved that the article in Soviet Sports had all the facts straight. A great roar coming from tens of thousands of excited throats accompanied nearly every kick. In a few seconds the game was on the Shaiba half of the field. One kick followed another in quick succession. Those Zubilo players were really good!

A few more moments, and they would finally be able to score.

"Aha!" Volka's neighbour shouted behind his back. "See?! What did I say! They'll show those Shaiba imbeciles a thing or two...."

Ah, how much better it would have been for all concerned if he had curbed his joy. He should not have nudged Hottabych in the side with such a triumphant look on his face, as if every man on the Zubilo team was his own favourite son, or at least his favourite pupil!

Hottabych started, tore his eyes from the paper, and took in the field at a glance. He sized up the situation like an expert and handed the paper back to Zhenya, who accepted it with a long face.

"I'll finish reading it later," the old man said. He hurriedly yanked a hair from his beard, and the Zubilo team's unexplainable and disgraceful sufferings began anew.

15:0! 16:0! 18:0! 23:0!

The ball flew into the Zubilo goal on an average of once every 40 seconds.

But what had happened to the goalie? Why did he clutch at the side-post

and wail "Mamma!" every time the ball was kicked into the goal? Why did he suddenly walk to the side with a thoughtful expression on his face-and for no apparent reason at all-and this at a most decisive moment, in the middle of a heated tangle right in front of the goal?

"Shame! It's outrageous! What's the matter with you!" the fans shouted from all sides. But he, the famous goalie, the pride of his country, staggered out of the goal and off to a side every time the opposite team closed in.

"What's the matter with you? Have you gone crazy?" the spare player croaked.

And the goalie moaned in reply:

"I sure have. Someone seems to be pulling me. I try to hold my ground, but something keeps pushing me out of the goal.

When I want to turn towards the ball, that same something presses me toward the goal-post so hard that I can't tear myself away."

"Things are really bad!"

"Couldn't be worse!"

The situation was so extraordinary that there was not a person present at the stadium, including the ticket collectors, militia men and food vendors, who was not taking the strange events to heart and discussing them loudly.

There was only one fan among the thousands who, though suffering keenly, was remarkably silent. This was an amazingly uncommunicative man of about fifty-five, grey-haired, tall and lanky, with a long, yellowish stony face. His face was equally stony during an unimportant game and during the finals, when a successful kick decides the champion of the year. He was always equally dour, straightlaced and immobile.

This day he was in his usual seat, which was right in front of Hottabych. As he was a Zubilo fan, one can well imagine the anguish in his sunken, bony chest. However, only the shifting of his eyes and the barely discernible movements of his head indicated that he was far from indifferent to the events taking place on the field. He apparently had a bad heart, and had to take good care of himself, for any amount of emotion might have produced grave results. However, even as he felt around with a practised gesture for his box of sugar and his bottle of medicine and dropped the medicine onto a bit of sugar, without ever tearing his eyes from the game, his face remained as immobile as if he were staring into space.

When the score became 23:0 it nearly finished him. He opened his thin pale lips and squeaked in a wooden voice:

"They could at least sell mineral water here!"

Hottabych, whose soul was singing joyfully at the unheard-of success of the Shaiba team, was more willing than ever to do people favours.

Upon hearing the words of his phlegmatic neighbour, he snapped his fingers softly. The man suddenly saw that he was holding a glass of ice-cold mineral water which had appeared from nowhere.

Anyone else in his place would have been astounded, or, at any rate, would have looked around at the people sitting to all sides of him. But this man merely raised the frosted glass to his lips with the same stony expression. However, he did not even take a sip: the poor Zubilo players were about to get the twenty-fourth ball kicked into their goal. He sat frozen to the spot with his glass raised and Zhenya, who was still frantically searching for a way to save the disgraced team, snatched the mineral water from him and dashed it onto Hottabych's beard.

"What treachery! What vile treachery!" the old Genie gasped and began feverishly yanking out one hair after another. Instead of the clear crystal tinkling, the boys were happy to hear a dull sound like that of a tightly pulled piece of string.

"And isn't it treachery to help the Shaiba players?" Volka asked acidly. "You'd better keep mum."

Meanwhile, just as had happened after the fourteenth goal, the revived Zubilo players once again tore through the forward and defence lines of the Shaiba team and raced the ball towards their goal.

The Shaiba defence had become unkeyed from their long idleness and could not collect their wits quickly to ward off the unexpected danger. Their goalie was really something to look at. There he sat on the grass, shelling melon seeds.

Choking, he jumped to his feet, but the Zubilo players had already kicked the ball straight towards the centre of the unprotected goal.

Just then, to the great torment of our young friends, they heard a clear crystal tinkling. Yes, Hottabych had finally been able to find a dry hair in his beard.

Oh, Zhenya, Zhenya! Where was your keen eye and sure hand? Why didn't you take good aim? The Zubilo team was as good as dead now!

"Hottabych! Dear, sweet Hottabych! Let the Zubilo players score at least once!" Volka wailed.

But Hottabych pretended to hear nothing. The ball, which was flying straight at the centre of the goal, suddenly swerved to the left and hit against the post with such force that it flew back across the whole field, careful to avoid the Zubilo players in its way, as though it was alive. Then it rolled softly into the long-suffering Zubilo goal!

"24:0!"

This was an amazing score, considering that the teams were equal.

Volka lost his temper completely.

"I demand-no, I order you to stop this mockery immediately!" he hissed.

"Otherwise, I'll never be friends with you again! You have your choice: the Shaiba team or me!"

"Why, you're a football fan yourself. Can't you understand my feelings?" the old man pleaded, but he sensed from Volka's expression that this time their friendship might really end. And so, he whispered back, "I await your further orders."

"The Zubilo team isn't to blame that you're a Shaiba fan. You've made them the laughing-stock of the country. Make it so that everyone should see they're not to blame for losing."

"I hear and I obey, O young goalie of my soul!"

No sooner had the umpire's whistle died down, announcing the end of the first time, than the entire Zubilo team began to sneeze and cough for all it was worth.

Forming a semblance of a formation, they dragged their feet listlessly to their locker room, sneezing and coughing loudly.

A moment later a doctor was summoned, since all eleven players were feeling ill. The doctor felt each one's pulse in turn, he asked them to take off their shirts, then looked in their mouths and finally summoned the umpire. "I'm afraid you'll have to call off the game."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Because the Zubilo team can't play for at least seven more days. The whole team is sick," the doctor answered dazedly.

"Sick! What's the matter?"

"It's a very strange case. All these eleven grown men have come down with the measles. I would never have believed it if I had not given them a thorough check-up just now."

Thus ended the only football match in history in which a fan had an opportunity to influence the game. As you see, it did not come to any good.

The unusual instance of eleven adult athletes simultaneously contracting the measles for the second time in their lives and waking up the following morning in the pink of health was described in great detail in an article by the famous Professor Hooping Cough and published in the medical journal Measles and Sneezles. The article was entitled "That's a Nice How D'You Do!" and is still so popular that one can never get a copy of the magazine in the libraries, as they are always on loan. That is why, dear readers, you might as well not look for it, since you'll only waste your time for nothing.

RECONCILIATION

The little cloud that was covering the sun floated off and disappeared, as it was no longer needed. Once again it became hot. A hundred thousand fans were slowly leaving the stadium through the narrow concrete passages.

No one was in a hurry. Everyone wanted to voice an opinion about the amazing game which had ended so strangely.

These opinions were each more involved than the previous one. However, not even the most vivid imaginations could think of an explanation that would so much as resemble the true reason for all the queer things they had witnessed.

Only three people took no part in these discussions. They left the North Section in deep silence. They entered a crowded trolley-bus in silence and alighted in silence at Okhotny Ryad, where they separated.

"Football is an excellent game," Hottabych finally mustered up the courage to say.

"Mm-m-m," Volka replied.

"I can just imagine how sweet the moment is when you kick the ball into the enemy's goal!" Hottabych continued in a crestfallen voice. "Isn't that so, O Volka?"

"Mm-m-m."

"Are you still angry with me, O goalie of my heart? I'll die if you don't answer me!"

He scurried along beside his angry friend, sighing sadly and cursing the hour he had agreed to go to the game.

"What do you think!" Volka snapped, but then continued in a softer tone, "Boy, what a mess! I'll never forget it as long as I live. Have a look at this new-found fan! No sir, we'll never take you to a football game again! And we don't need your tickets, either."

"Your every word is my command," Hottabych hurried to assure him, pleased to have got off so easily. "I'll be quite content if you occasionally find the time to tell me of the football matches."

So they continued on as good friends as ever.

WHERE SHOULD THEY LOOK FOR OMAR?

To look at Hottabych's healthy face, no one would ever suspect he had been seriously ill so recently.

His cheeks were a soft, even shade of old-age pink. His step was as light and as quick as always, and a broad smile lighted his artless face. And only Volka, who knew Hottabych so well, noticed that a secret thought was constantly gnawing at the old Genie. Hottabych often sighed, he stroked

his beard thoughtfully, and large tears would ever so often roll from his frank, friendly eyes.

Volka would pretend not to notice and did not bother the old man with tactless questions. He was convinced that in the end Hottabych would be the first to speak. That is exactly what happened.

"Grief and sadness rent my old heart, O noble saviour of Genies," Hottabych said softly one day when a magnificent sunset coloured the evening waters of the Moskva River a delicate pink. "Thoughts of my poor lost brother and of his terrible and hapless fate do not leave me for a moment. The more I think of him, the more I feel I should set out to search for him as soon as possible. What do you think of this, O wise Volka ibn Alyosha? And if you regard this decision kindly, would you not make me happy by sharing the joys and sorrows of this journey with me?"

"Where do you want to start looking for your brother?" Volka asked in a business-like way, since he was no longer surprised at the most unexpected suggestions Hottabych might have.

"If you remember, O Volka, at the very dawn of our extremely happy acquaintance, I told you that Sulayman's Genies threw him into one of the Southern Seas, sealed in a copper vessel. There, along the shores of the hot countries, is where one must naturally look for Omar Asaf."

The possibility of setting out on a journey to the Southern Seas really appealed to Volka.

"All right. I'll come along with you. Wherever you go, I go. It would be nice if.. ." Volka fumbled.

But a cheerful Hottabych continued: "...if we could take our wonderful friend Zhenya ibn Kolya along. Have I understood you correctly, O my kind Volka ibn Alyosha?"

"Uh-huh."

"There could not have been a shadow of doubt," Hottabych said. It was decided then and there that the expedition setting out to search for Hottabych's unfortunate brother would leave no later than in two days' time.

However, if the time of departure caused no discord, it quite suddenly became apparent that there were serious differences on the question of a means of transportation.

"Let's go by magic carpet," Hottabych suggested. "There's enough room for all of us."

"Oh no," Volka objected strongly. "No more magic carpets for me. Thanks a lot! Our last trip was enough for me. I don't want to freeze like a dog a second time."

"I'll supply you both with warm clothing, O blessed Volka. And if you so desire, a large bonfire will constantly burn in the middle of the carpet. We can warm ourselves beside it during our flight."

"No, no, no! The magic carpet is out of the question. Let's go to Odessa by train. Then, from Odessa...."

Hottabych immediately accepted Volka's plan and Zhenya, who was told of it in detail a short half hour later, enthusiastically approved.

THE STORY TOLD BY THE CONDUCTOR OF THE MOSCOW-ODESSA EXPRESS OF WHAT

HAPPENED ON THE NARA-MALY YAROSLAYETS LINE

(Told by the conductor to Ms assistant, who was asleep during the events described herein)

"I woke you up just to tell you that a very strange thing has happened in our car.

"Well, I made up the beds for the passengers, the same as always, and the ones in Compartment 7, too. The passengers there were a bearded old bird in an old-fashioned straw boater and two boys. The boys looked about the same age. And what do you think: not a single piece of luggage !No, sir, not a single one!

"Just then, one of the boys, a blond freckled lad, says:

" 'Can you please tell us where the dining car is?'

"And I says, 'I'm sorry, but we don't have a dining car, There'll be tea and crackers in the morning.'

"Then the boy looks at the old man and the old man winks at him. So the boy says, 'Never mind, we'll manage without your tea, since you haven't a dining car.'

" 'Ha,' I thought, 'I'd like to see how you'll make out all the way to Odessa without my tea.' So I came back here to our compartment, but I left a chink in the door when I closed it.

"Everyone in the car was sound asleep, having sweet dreams, but all the time there was buzz-buzz-buzz coming from Compartment 7-they kept on talking and whispering all the time. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I can tell you for sure they were talking.

"Then suddenly their door opens and the same old man sticks out his head. He didn't notice me watching him so he pushed his old hat back. And what d'you think he did? Upon my word, I'm tellin' the truth! He pulled a fistful of hair from his beard-may I drop dead on the spot if he didn't!

" 'Goodness,' I thought, 'he's crazy! Just my luck to get a madman while I'm on duty.' Well, I didn't say anything and waited to see what'd happen.

"Well, the old man tore this same fistful of hair into little pieces, then he threw this litter on the floor and mumbled something. I felt more and more sure he was mad and that I'd have to put him off at Bryansk, no doubt about it.

" 'Well,' I thought, 'there'll be no end of worry! Why, maybe he'll start attacking the passengers this very minute, or breaking the windows!'

"No, he didn't start any trouble, but just stood there mumbling. After he mumbled a while more, he went back into his compartment.

"All of a sudden I heard someone walking barefoot down the passage, coming from behind. That meant whoever it was had come in from the platform. I sure was surprised, because I always lock the platforms when we pull out of a station. Well, I looked round, and-upon my sacred word of honour, I'm telling the truth!-I saw four young fellows coming towards me from the platform. They were as sunburned as vacationers and quite naked. All they had on were little cloths round their hips. And barefoot. As skinny as could be! You could count every rib.

"I came out of our compartment and said, 'Citizens, I believe you've got your cars mixed. All our compartments are occupied.'

"And they all answered together, 'Silence, infidel! We know where we're going! We've come exactly to the place we want.'

"So I says, 'Then I'd like to see your tickets, please.'

"And they all said together again, 'Don't annoy us, foreigner, for we are hurrying to our lord and master!'

"So I says, 'I'm surprised that you call me a foreigner. I'm a Soviet citizen and I'm in my own country. That's for one. And in the second place, we haven't had any masters here since the Revolution. That,' I said, 'is in the second place.'

"So their leader says, 'You should be ashamed, infidel! You are taking advantage of the fact that our hands are occupied and we therefore cannot kill you for your terrible insolence. It is most dishonourable of you to take advantage of us so.'

"I forgot to tell you that they were piled high with all sorts of food. One was carrying a heavy tray with roast lamb and rice. Another had a huge basket of apples, pears, apricots and grapes.

The third one was balancing something that looked like a pitcher on his head, and something was splashing inside the pitcher. The fourth was holding two large platters of meat pies and pastries. To tell you the truth, I just stood there gaping.

"Then the leader says, 'Infidel, you'd do better to show us where Compartment 7 is, for we are in a hurry to fulfil our orders.'

"Then I began to put two and two together and asked, 'What does your boss look like? Is he a little old man with a beard?'

" 'Yes, that is he. That is whom we serve.'

"I showed them to Compartment 7, and on the way I said, 'I'll have to fine your boss for letting you travel without tickets. Have you been working for him long?'

"So the leader says, 'We've been serving him for three thousand five hundred years.'

"To tell you the truth, I thought I didn't hear him right. So I says again, 'How many years did you say?'

" 'You heard me, that's exactly how long we've served him- three thousand five hundred years.'

"The other three nodded.

" 'Good gracious,' I thought, 'as if one crazy man wasn't enough-now I have four more on my neck!'

"But I went on talking to them as I would to any normal passengers. 'What a shame! Look how many years you've been working for him and he can't even get you some ordinary overalls. If you'll pardon the expression, you're absolutely naked.'

"So the leader says, 'We don't need overalls. We don't even know what they are.'

" 'It's strange to hear that coming from someone who's worked so many years. I guess you're from far away. Where d'you live?'

" 'We've just come from Ancient Arabia.'

"Then I says, 'Well, that clears everything up. Here's Compartment 7. Knock on the door.'

"Just then, the same little old man comes out and all his men fall to their knees and stretch out the food and drinks they've brought. But I called the old man off to a side and said, 'Are these your employees?'

" 'Yes, they are.'

" 'They have no tickets. That means you have to pay a fine. Will you pay it?'

" 'Right away, if you wish. But won't you first tell me what a fine is?'

"I saw the old man was being sensible, so I began to explain things in a whisper, 'One of your men has gone out of his mind:

he says he's been working for you for three thousand five hundred years. I'm sure you'll agree he's crazy.'

"Then the old man says, 'I cannot agree, since he is not lying. Yes, that's right-three thousand five hundred years. Even a little longer, since I was only two hundred or two hundred and thirty when I became their master.'

"So I says to him, 'Stop making a fool of me! It doesn't become your age. If you don't pay the fine immediately, I'll put them off at the next

station. And, anyway, you look like a suspicious character, going on such a long journey without any luggage.'

" 'What's luggage?'

" 'You know, bundles, suitcases and such stuff.'

"The old man laughed and said, 'Why are you inventing things, O conductor? Saying that I have no luggage. Just look at the shelves.'

"I looked up at the luggage racks and they were jammed! I'd looked a moment before and there hadn't been anything there, and suddenly-just imagine!-so many suitcases and bundles!

"Then I said, 'Something's wrong here. Pay the fine quickly and I'll bring the chief conductor over at the next stop. Let him decide. I can't understand what's going on.'

"The old man laughed again. 'What fine?' says he. 'Whom do I have to pay a fine for?'

"Then I really got angry. I turned around and pointed to the passage, but there was no one there! I ran up and down the whole car, but couldn't find a trace of my four stray passengers.

"Then the old man said, 'O conductor, you had better go back to your own compartment.' And so I went back.

"Now d'you understand why I woke you up? Don't you believe me?"

An hour before the train arrived in Odessa, the conductor entered Compartment 7 to remove the bedding. Hottabych treated him to some apples.

It was quite apparent that the man did not remember anything of the incident which had taken place the night before.

After he had left their compartment, Zhenya said with admiration: "I must admit, Volka is a bright chap!"

"I should think so!" Hottabych exclaimed. "Volka ibn Alyosha is unquestionably an excellent fellow and his suggestion is worthy of great praise."

Since the reader might not be too clear on the meaning of this short conversation, we hurry to explain.

When the completely confused conductor left Compartment 7 the previous night, Volka said to Hottabych, "Can you do something to make him forget what's happened?"

"Why, O Volka ibn Alyosha, that's as simple as pie."

"Then please do it and as quickly as possible. He'll go to sleep then, and when he wakes up in the morning he won't remember anything."

"Excellent, O treasure-store of common sense!" Hottabych said admiringly, waved his hand and made the conductor forget everything.

THE STRANGE SAILING SHIP

Several passengers were talking leisurely as they leaned on the rail of the excursion ship "Kolkhida," sailing from Odessa to Batumi. Powerful diesel engines hummed far below, in the depths of the ship. The water whispered dreamily as it lapped against the steep sides, and high above, over the spar deck, the ship's wireless piped anxiously.

"You know, it's really a shame that the large sailing ships of yore, those white-winged beauties, are a thing of the past. How happy I would be to find myself on a real frigate... Just to enjoy the sight of those billowing white sails, to listen to the creaking of the mighty yet graceful masts, to watch in amazement as, at the captain's command, the crew scrambles up the rigging! If I could only see a real sailing ship! I mean a real genuine one! Nowadays even a bark has to have a motor, you know, even though-mark my words-it's considered a sailboat!"

"A motor-sailboat," a man wearing the uniform of the Merchant Marine added. They fell silent. All except the sailor went over to the left side to watch a school of tireless dolphins splash and cavort in the warm noonday sea. Dolphins were nothing new to the sailor. He stretched out in a deck chair and picked up a magazine lazily. Soon the sun made him drowsy. He closed the magazine and fanned himself with it.

Then something attracted his attention. He stopped fanning himself, jumped to his feet and rushed to the railing. Far off, near the very horizon, he saw a beautiful but terribly old-fashioned sailing ship skimming over the waves. It seemed like something from a fairy tale.

"Everybody! Everybody hurry over here!" he shouted. "Look at that sailing ship! Isn't it ancient! Oh, and something's wrong with its mainmast! It doesn't have a mainmast! Why, it just isn't there! My goodness! Just look! The sails are all billowed out the wrong way! According to every law of nature, the foremast should have been blown overboard long ago! It's really a miracle!"

However, by the time the other passengers heeded his words and returned to the starboard side, the unknown vessel had disappeared from sight. We say "unknown," because the sailor was ready to swear that the wonderful sailing ship was not registered at any Soviet port on the Black Sea. This is true. In fact, it wasn't registered at any foreign port, either; it wasn't registered any place, for the simple reason that it had appeared in the world and was launched but a few short hours before.

The name of the vessel was the "Sweet Omar," in honour of the unfortunate brother of our old friend, Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab.

ABOARD THE "SWEET OMAR"

Had our friend the conductor on the Moscow-Odessa express miraculously found himself aboard the twin-masted "Sweet Omar," he would not have been most amazed at the fact that he had suddenly found himself aboard a sailing vessel, nor that this vessel did not in any way resemble a usual sea or river craft. He would have been most amazed at finding that he was already acquainted with the passengers and crew.

The old man and his two young companions who had left Compartment 7 that morning were its passengers, while the four dark-skinned citizens whose term of service dated back to the 16th century B.C. were its crew.

One can well imagine that a second encounter would have landed the impressive conductor in bed for a long time.

Despite the fact that Volka and Zhenya had become accustomed to witnessing the most unexpected events during the past few days, they were most amazed to find their recent acquaintances aboard the ship and to discover that they were also excellent sailors.

After the boys had stood gazing at the quick and skilful movements of the small crew scurrying up and down the riggings just as if they were on a polished floor, they went to explore the rest of the ship. It was very beautiful, but small-no larger than a Moscow river launch. However, Hottabych assured them that even Sulayman, the Son of David, did not have a ship as big as the "Sweet Omar."

Everything on the ship glittered with cleanliness and splendour. Its sides and high, carved bow and stern were inlaid with gold and ivory. The priceless rosewood deck was covered with rugs as magnificent as those which adorned the cabins.

That is why Volka was so surprised at suddenly coming upon a dark and filthy cubby-hole in the prow. In it were plank beds covered with rags.

As he looked in disgust at the meagre furnishings of this tiny room, Zhenya joined him. After careful scrutiny, Zhenya decided the unsightly hole was intended for the pirates they might capture on the way.

"Not at all," Volka persisted. "This place was forgotten about after a complete overhauling. Sometimes, after repairs, there's a forgotten corner full of rags and all kinds of rubbish."

"What do you mean by 'a complete overhauling' when this ship didn't even exist this morning?" Zhenya protested.

Volka had no answer to this question, and so the boys set off to find

Hottabych, to ask him to help solve the mystery. But they found the old man asleep and thus did not speak to him until an hour or two later, at dinner time.

Tucking their feet under them uncomfortably, they sat down on a thick, brightly-coloured carpet. There were neither chairs nor tables in the cabin or anywhere else on board.

One of the crew remained above at the wheel, while the others brought in and placed before them many various dishes, fruits and beverages. When they turned to leave, the boys called to them:

"Why are you leaving?"

And Volka added politely, "Aren't you going to have lunch?"

The servants only shook their heads in reply.

Hottabych was confused.

"I must not have been listening intently, O my young friends. For a moment, I thought you had invited these servants to join us at the table."

"Sure we did," Volka said. "Why, what's wrong with that?"

"But they are only ordinary sailors," Hottabych objected in a voice that indicated that the matter was now closed.

However, to his great surprise, the boys held their ground.

"All the more so, if they're sailors. They're not parasites, they're real hard workers," Volka said.

And Zhenya added:

"And let's not forget that they seem to be Negroes and that means they are an oppressed nation. That's why we should be especially considerate."

"This seems to be a most unfortunate misunderstanding," Hottabych said excitedly, confused by the solid opposition of the boys. "I must ask you again to remember that these are plain sailors. It is not becoming to us to sit down to eat with them. This would lower us both in their eyes and in our own."

"It wouldn't lower me at all," Volka objected heatedly.

"Or me, either. On the contrary, it'll be very interesting," Zhenya said, looking at the steaming turkey with hungry eyes. "Hurry up and ask them to sit down, otherwise the turkey'll get cold."

"I don't feel like eating, O my young friends. I'll eat later on," Hottabych said glumly and clapped loudly three times.

The sailors appeared immediately.

"These young gentlemen have kindly expressed the desire to partake of their meal together with you, my undeserving servants."

"O great and mighty ruler!" the eldest of the sailors cried, falling to his knees before Hottabych and touching the precious carpet with his forehead. "We don't feel like eating at all. We are very full. We are so full, that if we eat a single chicken leg our stomachs will burst and we

will die in terrible agony."

"They're lying!" Volka whispered to Zhenya with conviction;

"I'm ready to bet anything that they're lying. They wouldn't mind eating, but they're afraid of Hottabych." Then he addressed the sailors.

"You say you're full, but won't you please tell me when you've had time to eat?"

"Then know ye, O young and noble master, that we can go without food for a year or more and never feel hungry," the sailor replied evasively.

"They'll never agree, they're afraid of him," Zhenya said in disappointment.

The sailors backed out and were gone.

"To my great pleasure, I suddenly feel hungry again," Hottabych said cheerfully. "Let us begin quickly."

"No, Hottabych, you eat by yourself. We're no company for you!" Zhenya muttered angrily and got up. "Come on, Volka!"

"Come on. Golly! You try to educate a person and change his ways, but nothing good comes of it..."

And so, the old man was left alone with the untouched dinner. He sat there with his legs tucked under him, as straight and stiff and solemn as an Eastern god. But the moment the boys disappeared behind the drapery that separated the cabin from the deck, he began to pound his head with his small fists that were nevertheless as hard as iron.

O woe to him, poor Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab! Something had gone wrong again! Yet, how happily the "Sweet Omar" had started on its journey! How sincerely delighted the boys had been with its adornments, its sparkling sails, the soft carpets in which their bare feet sank up to their ankles, the priceless handrails of ebony and ivory, the mighty masts covered with a mosaic of precious stones! Why had they suddenly conceived such a strange idea? But what if it wasn't just an idea or a caprice, but something quite different? How queer these boys were to have refused such a feast, despite their hunger, and only because his servants were not allowed to share the meal as equals! Oh, how puzzling and unfair it was, and how hungry, how very hungry Hottabych was!

While his feeling of attachment for Volka and Zhenya was struggling with prejudices of thousands of years' standing, our young travellers were discussing the situation heatedly. Hottabych's servants tried to keep out of sight, but one of them, either absent-mindedly or from lack of caution, suddenly appeared from the very cubby-hole Volka had believed was intended for captive pirates. Then the dingy hole on the luxurious "Sweet Omar" was the sailors' quarters!

"Oh, no!" Volka said indignantly. "We'll never remain on such a ship. Either Hottabych changes the rules immediately, or else we call off our

friendship and he gets us back home."

Suddenly they heard Hottabych's voice behind them.

"O sails of my heart," the crafty old man said, as if nothing untoward had happened. "Why are you wasting your time here on deck, when a most delightful and filling dinner awaits you? The turkey is still steaming, but it can get cold, and then it certainly will taste worse. Let us hurry back to the cabin, for my beloved sailors and I, your faithful servant, are dying of hunger and thirst."

The boys looked into the cabin they had just left and saw the sailors sitting primly on the rug, awaiting their return.

"All right," Volka said dryly. "But we're still going to have a long and serious talk with you, Hottabych. Meanwhile, let's have our dinner."

No sooner was dinner over, than the sea became turbulent;

the small ship now flew up on the crest of a huge wave, now plunged down into a deep chasm between two tremendous walls of water. The waves thundered and crashed as they washed over the deck and carried off the carpets that covered it. Streams of water kept rushing into the cabins. It became chilly, but the brazier with hot coals was tossed back and forth so violently that they had to throw it overboard to prevent a fire. The servant-sailors, whose only clothing were their loincloths, turned grey from the cold, as they battled the flapping sails.

In another half hour nothing but a sad memory would have remained of the "Sweet Omar." However, the storm ceased as unexpectedly as it had begun. The sun peeped out. It became warm again. But everything became terribly calm. The sails hung limply on the masts and the ship began to rock softly on the water without moving forward an inch.

Hottabych decided that this was just the time to improve his shaky relations with his young companions. Rubbing his hands together merrily, he said, "Calm? Why you should know, O benevolent and just youths, that a calm means nothing to us. We can do fine without the wind. The 'Sweet Omar' will go forward faster than ever. May it be so!" He snapped the fingers of his left hand.

Instantly the "Sweet Omar" sped forward at top speed; the sails, meeting the resistance of the air, naturally filled out in a direction opposite to the ship's movement.

In the entire history of sailing ships, no one had ever seen such a strange sight. However, neither Volka nor Zhenya, nor Hottabych, who at the time the ship started were all standing on the stern, had time to enjoy the sight, since the sudden forward thrust threw them overboard. The next moment the mainmast, unable to withstand the terrible resistance of the air, came crashing down on the very spot where the three travellers had been standing but a moment before.

The "Sweet Omar" disappeared from sight immediately.

"A life-boat, or even a life-saver would really come in handy now," Volka thought as he splashed about in the water and blew air like a horse. "We can't even see the shore."

And true, no matter which way he looked, he could see nothing but the calm and endless sea.

THE "VK-1" MAGIC-CARPET-SEAPLANE

"Where are you going?" Volka shouted to Zhenya, who was swimming off rapidly. "You won't reach the shore anyway, Don't waste your energy! Turn over and float on your back."

Zhenya took his advice. Hottabych also turned over, holding his hat carefully above water.

Thus began the only conference of shipwrecked people in the history of sailing, in which the speakers expressed their opinions while floating on their backs.

"Well, we're shipwrecked!" Volka said with something close to satisfaction. He had taken upon himself the duties of chairman. "What are you planning to do?" he asked, noticing that Hottabych had begun yanking hairs from his beard with his free hand.

"I want to return our ship. It's a great stroke of luck that my beard is completely dry."

"There's no hurry," Volka interrupted. "The question is: do we want to return to it or not? I, for one, do not. To tell you the truth, there are inhuman rules aboard. It's disgusting to even think of it."

"I agree. The 'Sweet Omar' is out of the question," Zhenya added. "But you know, Hottabych, you'll have to act quickly to save the sailors, otherwise they'll go down with the ship!"

Hottabych frowned.

"The fate of my unworthy servants should not bother you at all. They have been in Arabia for not less than five minutes already. That is where they reside, that is where they are now awaiting my orders. But please tell me, O masts of my heart, why should we not continue our journey aboard the 'Sweet Omar'?"

"I thought we made that clear," Volka said.

"And anyway, a sailing ship is too slow and unreliable. We're dependent on every little change in the weather. No, the 'Sweet Omar' is out," Zhenya said.

"O anchors of my happiness!" Hottabych whined pitifully. "I'll do

anything to...."

"No, it's out, and that's the end of it," Volka interrupted and shivered. It was most unpleasant to lie in the water fully dressed. "It remains to be seen what else Hottabych can suggest."

"I can take you under my arms and fly."

"No good!" Volka said. "Who wants to fly under somebody's arms!"

"Not somebody's-mine!" Hottabych replied in a hurt voice.

"It makes no difference."

"Then I would venture to suggest to your enlightened attention the magic carpet. It is an excellent means of transportation, O my choosy friends!"

"There's nothing excellent about it. You freeze on it, and it's too slow, and there's no comforts at all," Volka said thoughtfully and suddenly exclaimed, "I've got it! Upon my word of honour, I have a wonderful idea!"

At this, he went under, as in his excitement he could think of nothing better to do than clap his hands. He bobbed up again, huffing and spitting water, and then resumed his comfortable position on his back, continuing as if nothing had happened:

"We have to modernize the magic carpet: it should be streamlined and cold-resistant, and it should have bunks and be on pontoons."

It was most difficult to explain Volka's idea to Hottabych. In the first place, the old man did not know what "streamlined" meant. In the second place, he could not visualize a pair of pontoons.

It would seem that "streamlined" was such a simple word, but they had to explain and explain until they finally hit upon the thought of saying that a streamlined magic carpet should look like a hollowed-out cucumber. It also took a great deal of explaining to make Hottabych understand what pontoons were like. Finally, a streamlined "VK-1" magic-carpet-seaplane soared into the air and set its course at South-South-West. In translation to ordinary words, "VK-1" meant "Vladimir Kostylkov. First Model."

This magic-carpet-seaplane, resembling a huge cucumber with a tiny stem in back, had three berths and two windows on each side, cut through the heavy carpeting.

The flying qualities of Volka's plane were immeasurably superior to those of an ordinary magic carpet. The Black Sea, the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, Asia Minor and the sun-parched plateau of Arabia flashed by below. Then they saw the yellow sands of the Sinai Desert. The thin ribbon of the Suez Canal separated it from the no less yellow sands of the Arabian Desert, which was Africa, Egypt. Hottabych had planned to begin his search for Omar Asaf here, in the Mediterranean, from its eastern point to its western end. But no sooner had the "VK-1" descended to an altitude of 200 metres, than Hottabych groaned and said he was an old fool. The

magic-carpet-seaplane gained altitude and headed west. After spending so many years in the vessel, Hottabych had forgotten that this was where the Nile discharged into the Mediterranean and where the water was always muddy from the slime and sand the great river carried far out to sea. How could one even attempt a search in such sticky yellow mire? It would only irritate the eyes.

Hottabych decided to put off the exploration of this inconvenient area till last, if their search for Omar Asaf in other parts of the Mediterranean proved futile.

A short while later they landed in a quiet blue lagoon close to the Italian city of Genoa.

HOTTABYCH IS LOST AND FOUND AGAIN

"Well, wish me luck!" Hottabych exclaimed, turning into a fish and disappearing into the lagoon.

The water was crystal-clear, so very unlike the water of the Nile Delta, and they had a good view of the old man working his fins quickly as he headed for the open sea.

While awaiting his return, the boys went in for a good dozen dips, they dived to their heart's content, lay in the sun until they were dizzy, and, finally, with hunger clawing at their insides, they began to worry. Hottabych had been gone for a suspiciously long time, though he had promised not to be away longer than an hour. The sun had long since set, colouring the horizon and the calm sea in tints of amazing beauty; thousands of city lights twinkled in the distance, but still the old man had not returned.

"Could he have got lost?" Zhenya said despondently.

"He can't get lost," Volka answered. "Chaps like him never get lost."

"He might have been swallowed by a shark."

"There aren't any sharks in these waters," Volka objected, though he wasn't too sure of his words.

"I'm hungry!" Zhenya confessed after a long silence.

Just then, a rowboat nosed into the beach with a soft splash. Three fishermen climbed out. One of them began to lay a fire of driftwood, while the others picked out the smaller fish. They cleaned it and threw it into a kettle of water.

"Let's go ask them for something to eat," Zhenya suggested. "They look like nice working people. I'm sure they'll give us something."

Volka agreed.

"Good evening, Signores!" Zhenya bowed politely, as he addressed the

fishermen.

"Just think how many homeless children there are in our poor Italy!" one of the three, a thin, grey-haired man, said hoarsely. "Giovanni, give them something to eat."

"We've just enough bread for ourselves, but there's plenty of onions and more than enough salt!" a curly-haired stocky youth of about nineteen answered cheerfully. He was busy cleaning fish.

"Sit down, boys. Soon the best fish soup ever cooked in or around Genoa will be ready."

Either the cheerful Giovanni was truly a gifted cook by nature, or else the boys were famished, but they agreed that they had never eaten anything more delicious in their lives. They ate with such gusto, smacking their lips from sheer joy, that the fishermen watching them chuckled.

"If you want some more, you can cook it yourselves, there nothing complicated about it," Giovanni said and stretched. "We'll doze off meanwhile. Be sure you don't take any big fishes, they go to market tomorrow, so we'll have money to pay our taxes."

Zhenya began puttering around the fire, while Volka rolled up his trousers and made his way to the boat full of fish.

He had gathered as much as he needed and was about to return to the beach, when his eyes chanced upon the net folded near the mast. A lonely fish was struggling frantically within, now giving up, now resuming its useless battle to free itself.

"It will come in handy for the chowder," Volka said, plucking it from the net. But it again began to struggle in his hands, and he suddenly felt sorry for it. He turned round to make sure the fishermen weren't looking and threw it back into the water.

The fish made a small splash as it hit the dark surface of the lagoon and turned into a beaming Hottabych.

"May the day upon which you were born be forever blessed, O kind-hearted son of Alyosha!" he exclaimed gratefully, as he stood waist-deep in water. "Once again you've saved my life. A few moments more and I would have choked in that net. got foolishly trapped in it while searching for my unfortunate brother."

"Hottabych, old man! What a great fellow you are for being alive! We were so worried!"

"And I, too, was tortured by the thought that you, O twice my saviour, and our young friend were left alone and hungry in an alien country."

"We're not hungry at all. These fishermen really treated us to a feast."

"May these kind people be blessed! Are they rich?"

"I think they're very poor."

"Then let's hurry, and I will return their kindness generously."

"I don't think it's the right thing to do," Volka said after a moment's pause. "Put yourself in their place: suddenly you see a wet old man climbing out of the water in the middle of the night. No, this is no good at all."

"You're right as always," Hottabych agreed. "Return to the shore and I'll join you presently."

A short while later, the sleeping fishermen were awakened by the sound of an approaching horse. Soon a strange rider stopped at the smouldering fire.

He was an old man in a cheap linen suit and a hard straw boater. His magnificent beard was wind-blown, disclosing to all who cared to look an embroidered Ukrainian shirt. He wore a pair of gold and silver embroidered pink slippers with funny turned-up toes. His feet were placed in gold stirrups that were studded with diamonds and emeralds. The saddle upon which he sat was so magnificent that it was surely worth a fortune. The prancing horse was of indescribable beauty. In each hand the old man held a large leather suitcase.

"Would you please direct me to the noble fishermen who have so kindly taken in and fed two lonely, hungry boys?" he said to Giovanni, who had risen to greet him.

Without waiting for an answer, he dismounted, and, with a sigh of relief, set the suitcases on the sand.

"What's the matter? Do you know them?" Giovanni asked cautiously.

"Certainly I know my young friends!" Hottabych cried, embracing each in turn as they ran up to him.

Then he addressed the startled fishermen:

"Believe me, O most honourable of all fishermen, when I say I do not know how to thank you enough for your precious hospitality and kindness!"

"Why, there's nothing to thank us for. Not for the fish certainly?" the grey-haired fisherman said in surprise. "It didn't set us back much, believe me, Signore."

"These are the words of a truly selfless man, and they only increase my feeling of gratitude. Permit me to repay you with these modest gifts," Hottabych said, handing a dumb-founded Giovanni the two suitcases.

"There must be some mistake, O respected Signore," Giovanni uttered after exchanging puzzled glances with his companions. "Why, you can buy at least a thousand chowders like the one we shared with the boys for two such suitcases. I don't want you to think it was a very special kind of chowder. We're poor people...."

"It is you who are mistaken, O most modest of all kind-hearted people! Within these excellent boxes which you call by the scholarly name of 'suitcase' are riches that are thousands and thousands of times greater than

the cost of your soup. Nonetheless, I consider they cannot pay for it, for there is nothing more precious in the world than disinterested hospitality."

He opened the suitcases and everyone saw that they were crammed with magnificent, live, silvery fish.

While the fishermen were still wondering what sense there was in giving fishermen fish, Hottabych emptied the quivering contents of the suitcases onto the sand. It was then that the three men gasped in surprise and amazement: in some strange way, both suitcases were found to be crammed full of fish again! Hottabych emptied the suitcases once again, and once again they were filled with the marvellous gifts of the sea. This was repeated a fourth and a fifth time.

"And now," Hottabych said, enjoying the impression he had made, "if you wish, you can test the wonderful qualities of these 'suitcases' yourselves. Never again will you have to shiver in your little dingy in foul weather or in the fog of early dawn. You will no longer have to pray to Allah for luck, you will never again have to drag about the market-place with heavy baskets of fish. You need only take along one of these 'suitcases' and give the customer exactly as much as he wants. But I beg you, do not object," Hottabych said when he noticed that the fishermen were about to say something. "I assure you, there has been no mistake. May your life be happy and cloudless, O most noble of fishermen! Farewell! Hop up here, boys!"

With Giovanni's help, the boys climbed into the saddle behind Hottabych.

"Farewell, Signore! Good-bye, boys!" the dazed fishermen shouted, as they watched the surprising strangers disappear in the distance.

"Even if these were ordinary suitcases, not magic ones, we could get many liras for them," Giovanni said thoughtfully.

"Well, I think we'll finally be able to make ends meet now, Pietro," the oldest of the three added. He was close to sixty, with a wrinkled, weather-beaten face and dry, sinewy arms. "We'll pay our taxes, cure my cursed rheumatism, and buy you a coat, a hat and a pair of shoes, Giovanni. After all, you're a young man and you should be dressed well. As a matter of fact, some new clothes won't harm any of us, will they?"

"New clothes!" Giovanni mimicked angrily. "When there's so much sorrow and poverty everywhere! First of all, we'll have to help Giacomo's widow, you know, the one who drowned last year and left three children and an old mother."

"You're right, Giovanni," Pietro agreed. "We should help Giacomo's widow. He was a good and true friend."

Then the third fisherman entered the conversation. He was a man of thirty, and his name was Cristoforo.

"What about Luigi? We should give him some money, too. The poor

fellow's dying of tuberculosis."

"That's right," Giovanni said. "And Sybilla Capelli. Her son's been in prison for over a year now for organizing the strike."

"Just think how many people we can help," Giovanni said excitedly. And the three kind fishermen sat late into the night, discussing whom else they could help, now that they had the wonderful suitcases. These were honest and kind-hearted toilers, and the idea never entered their minds to use Hottabych's present in order to get rich and be wealthy fishmongers.

I am happy to tell this to my readers, so they'll know the old man's present fell into good hands, and I'm certain that none of them, if they were in the fishermen's place, would have acted otherwise.

THE VESSEL FROM THE PILLARS OF HERCULES

This time Hottabych was true to his word. He had promised he'd be back in two or three hours. At about a quarter to nine his beaming face shot out of the water. The old man was excited. He scrambled up on the beach, carrying a large seaweed-covered metal object over his head.

"I found him, my friends!" he yelled. "I found the vessel in which my unfortunate brother Omar Asaf ibn Hottab has been imprisoned these many centuries-may the sun always shine over him! I scanned the whole sea bottom and was beginning to despair when I noticed this magic vessel in the green vastness near the Pillars of Hercules."

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up and open it!" Zhenya cried, running up to the exultant old man.

"I dare not open it, for it is sealed with Sulayman's Seal. Let Volka ibn Alyosha, who freed me, also free my long-suffering little brother. Here's the vessel which I have spent so many sleepless nights dreaming about!" Hottabych continued, waving his find overhead.

"Here, O Volka, open it, to the joy of my brother Omar and myself!"

Pressing his ear to the side of the vessel, he laughed happily, "Oho, my friends! Omar is signalling to me from within!"

There was envy in Zhenya's eyes as he watched the old man hand a nattered Volka the vessel, or, rather, lay it at Volka's feet, since it was so heavy.

"But didn't you say that Omar was imprisoned in a copper vessel? This one's made of iron. Oh well, no matter.... Where's the seal? Aha, here it is!" Volka said, inspecting the vessel carefully from all sides.

Suddenly he turned pale and shouted:

"Quick, lie down! Zhenya, lie down! Hottabych, throw it right back into

the water and lie down!"

"You're mad!" Hottabych said indignantly. "I've dreamed of our meeting for so many years, and now, after finding him, you want me to throw him back to the waves."

"Throw it as far out as you can! Your Omar isn't inside! Hurry, or we'll all be dead!" Volka pleaded. Since the old man still hesitated, he yelled at the top of his voice, "It is an order! Do you hear?!"

Shrugging in dismay, Hottabych raised the heavy object, heaved it and tossed it at least 200 yards from the shore.

Before he had a chance to turn for an explanation towards Volka, who was standing beside him, there was a terrible explosion at the spot the vessel hit the water. A huge pillar of water rose over the calm surface of the lagoon and fell apart with a loud crash. Thousands of stunned and killed fish floated bellies up on the waves.

People were already running towards them, attracted by the sound of the explosion.

"Let's run!" Volka commanded.

They hurried to the highway and headed towards the city.

A grieved Hottabych lagged behind and kept turning round constantly. He was still not convinced that he had done right by obeying Volka.

"What did you see on the thing?" Zhenya asked when he had caught up with Volka, who was way ahead of him and Hottabych.

" 'Made in USA,' that's what!"

"So it was a bomb."

"No, it was a mine. There's a big difference! It was an underwater mine."

Hottabych sighed sadly.

When Hottabych saw that Omar was not to be found in the Mediterranean Sea, he suggested that they set out to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The suggestion in itself was extremely tempting. However, Volka was unexpectedly against it. He said that he had to be in Moscow the following day without fail. But he would not tell them the reason, he just said it was very important. And so, with a heavy heart, Hottabych temporarily put off the search for Omar Asaf.

The "VK-1" magic-carpet-seaplane with Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hottab, Volka Kostylkov and Zhenya Bogorad aboard, soared into the air and disappeared beyond the far-off mountains.

Some ten hours later it landed safely on the sloping bank of the Moskva River.

THE SHORTEST CHAPTER OF ALL

On a hot July noon, the ice-breaker "Ladoga," carrying a large group of excursionists, left the Red Pier of the port of Arkhangelsk. The band on the pier was playing marches. People waved their handkerchiefs and shouted "Bon voyage!" Trailing white puffs of steam, the ship sailed cautiously out into the middle of the Severnaya Dvina, past the many Soviet and foreign ships at anchor there, and headed for the mouth of the river and the White Sea. Endless cutters, motor-boats, schooners, trawlers, gigs, and cumbersome rafts ploughed the calm surface of the great northern river.

The excursionists, who were now gathered on the top deck, were leaving Arkhangelsk and the mainland for a whole month.

"Volka!" one of the passengers shouted to another, who was anxiously darting about near the captain's bridge, "Where's Hottabych?"

The perceptive reader will gather from these words that our old friends were among the passengers.

DREAMING OF THE "LADOGA"

Here we should like to pause for a moment and tell our readers how our three friends came to be aboard the "Ladoga" in the first place.

Naturally, everyone recalls that Volka failed his geography examination disgracefully, which was largely his own fault (he should never have relied on prompting). It is difficult to forget such an event. Volka certainly remembered it and was studying intently for his re-examination. He had decided to do his utmost to get an "A."

Despite his sincere desire to prepare for the examination, it was not as easy as it seemed. Hottabych was in the way. Volka had never mustered up enough courage to tell the old man of the true consequences of his fatal prompting. That is why he could never tell him he needed time to study, since he feared that Hottabych might decide to punish his teachers, and Varvara Stepanovna in particular, for having failed him.

Hottabych made himself particularly troublesome the day of the unusual football match between the Shaiba and Zubilo teams.

Feeling terribly contrite for all the anguish he had caused Volka at the stadium, Hottabych fairly shadowed him; he tried to regain his favour by scattering compliments and proposing the most tempting adventures. It was not until eleven o'clock at night that Volka had a chance to get down to his

studies.

"With your permission, 0 Volka, I shall go to sleep, for I feel somewhat drowsy," Hottabych finally said, as he yawned and crawled under the bed.

"Good night, Hottabych! Sweet dreams!" Volka answered, settling back in his chair and gazing at his bed longingly. He was also tired and, as he put it, was quite ready to doze off for some 500 or 600 minutes. But he had to study, and so reluctantly put his mind to his work.

Alas! The rustling of the pages attracted the sleepy Genie's attention. He stuck his head and dishevelled beard from under the bed and said in a foggy voice:

"Why aren't you in bed yet, 0 stadium of my soul?"

"I'm not sleepy. I have insomnia," Volka lied.

"My, my, my!" Hottabych said compassionately. "That's really too bad. Insomnia is extremely harmful at your delicate age. But don't despair, there's nothing I can't do."

He yanked several hairs from his beard, blew on them, whispered something, and Volka, who had no time to object to this untimely and unnecessary aid, fell asleep immediately, with his head resting on the table.

"Praised be Allah! All is well," Hottabych mumbled, crawling out from under the bed. "May you remain in the embraces of sleep until breakfast time!"

He lifted the sleeping boy lightly and carefully lay him to rest in his bed, pulling the blanket over him. Then, clucking and mumbling with satisfaction, he crawled back under the bed.

All night long the table lamp cast its useless light on the geography text-book, forlornly opened at page 11.

You can well imagine how cunning Volka had to be to prepare for his re-examination in such difficult circumstances. This was the very important reason why Volka (and, therefore, Hottabych and Zhenya) had to fly home to Moscow from Genoa instead of continuing on to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean.

However, Volka soon found out that preparing for the examination was only half the job done. He had yet to think of a way to get rid of Hottabych while he was in school taking the exam, to find a way of leaving the apartment unnoticed.

The telephone rang. Volka went to the foyer to answer it. It was Zhenya.

"Hello!" Volka said. "Yes, today. At noon.... He's still sleeping.... What? . . . Sure, he's well. He's a very healthy old man.... What?... No, I haven't thought of anything yet.... You're crazy! He'll be terribly hurt and

he'll do such mischief we won't be able to undo it in a hundred years....
Then you'll be here at ten-thirty? Fine!"

Hottabych stuck his head out of Volka's room. He whispered reproachfully, "Volka, why are you talking to our best friend Zhenya ibn Kolya in the hall? That's not polite. Wouldn't it be nicer if you invited him in?"

"How can he come in if he's at home?"

Hottabych was offended.

"I can't understand why you want to play tricks on your old devoted Genie. My ears have never yet deceived me. I just heard you talking to Zhenya."

"I was talking to him on the telephone. Don't you understand-te-le-ph one? I sure do have a lot of trouble with you! What a thing to get mad at! Come here, I'll show you what I mean!"

Hottabych joined him. Volka removed the receiver and dialled the familiar number.

"Will you please call Zhenya to the phone?" he said.

Then he handed the receiver to Hottabych.

"Here, you can talk to him now."

Hottabych pressed the receiver to his ear cautiously and his face broke into a puzzled smile.

"Is that really you, O blessed Zhenya ibn Kolya? Where are you now?... At home?... And I thought you were sitting in this black little thing I'm holding to my ear.... Yes, that's right, it's me, your devoted friend Hassan Abdurrahman ibn Hot-tab.... You'll be here soon? If that's the case, may your trip be blessed!"

Beaming with pleasure, he handed the receiver back to Volka, who was looking very superior.

"It's amazing!" Hottabych exclaimed. "Without once raising my voice I spoke to a boy who is two hours' walking distance away!"

Returning to Volka's room, the old man turned round slyly, snapped the fingers of his left hand, and there appeared on the wall over the aquarium an exact copy of the telephone hanging in the hall.

"Now you can talk to your friends as much as you like without leaving your own room."

"Golly, thanks a lot!" Volka said gratefully. He removed the receiver, pressed it to his ear and listened.

There was no dial tone.

"Hello! Hello!" he shouted. He shook the receiver and then blew into it. Still, there was no dial tone.

"The phone's broken," he explained to Hottabych. "FU unscrew the receiver and see what's wrong."

However, despite all his efforts, he could not unscrew it.

"It's made of the finest black marble," Hottabych boasted.

"Then there's nothing inside?" Volka asked disappointedly.

"Why, is there supposed to be something inside this, too? Just like in a watch?"

"Now I know why it doesn't work. You've only made a model of a telephone, without anything that's supposed to go inside it. But the insides are the most important part."

"What's supposed to be inside? A special kind of filling? The kind that was in the watch, with all kinds of wheels? You just explain it, and I'll make it exactly as it should be."

"It's not like a watch; it's entirely different. And it's not so easy to explain. You have to study all about electricity first," Volka said with an air of importance.

"Then teach me about what you call electricity."

"To begin with, you have to study arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, mechanical drawing and all kinds of other subjects."

"Then teach me these other subjects, too."

"Uh ... well... I don't know all of them myself, yet," Volka confessed.

"Then teach me what you already know."

"It'll take an awfully long time."

"That doesn't matter. I am willing, nonetheless. Don't keep me in suspense: will you teach me these subjects, which give a person such wonderful powers?"

"On condition that you do your homework well," Volka said sternly. "Here, read the paper while I go to see a friend of mine about something." He handed Hottabych a copy of Pionerskaya Pravda and set out for school.

The light-grey school building was unusually deserted and quiet. In the office on the first floor the principal and Varvara Stepanovna were discussing school problems, and on the third floor the loud, cheerful voices of the painters and plasterers echoed through the halls. It was summer and the school was being renovated.

"Well, my dear Varvara Stepanovna, what shall I say?" the principal said with a smile. "One can only envy such a vacation. How long will you be gone?" "I believe for a month or so."

Volka was glad to hear that Varvara Stepanovna would not be in danger of encountering Hottabych for at least a month. If only she would leave as quickly as possible!

"Aha, the crystal cupola of the heavens!" the principal teased as he greeted Volka. "Well, are you feeling better now?" "Yes, I'm quite well, thank you."

"Excellent! Have you prepared for your examination?" "Yes, I have."

"Well, then, let's have a little talk."

The little talk embraced almost the whole of sixth-grade geography. If Volka had thought of looking at the time, he would have been surprised to note that their little talk lasted nearly twenty minutes. But he couldn't be bothered with the time. He thought the principal was not asking the questions in great enough detail. He felt he could speak on each topic for five or ten minutes. He was experiencing the tormenting and at once pleasant feeling of a pupil who knows his subject inside-out and is most worried by the thought that this fact might go unnoticed by his examiners. But one look at Varvara Stepanovna convinced him that she was pleased with his answers. Nevertheless, when the principal said, "Good for you! Now I can see that your teacher hasn't wasted her time on you," Volka felt a pleasant chill run down his spine. His freckled face spread into such a broad smile that the principal and Varvara Stepanovna smiled, too.

"Yes, Kostylkov has obviously put in a lot of studying," his teacher said.

Ah, if they only knew of the terribly difficult conditions under which Volka had to prepare for his exam! What stratagems he had had to resort to, how he had had to hide from Hottabych in order to have a chance to study quietly; what colossal barriers the unsuspecting Hottabych had put in his way! How much more his teachers would have respected his achievements, had they only known!

For a moment, Volka was on the point of boasting of his own success as a teacher (not everyone can proudly say he has taught a Genie to read and write!), but he checked himself in time.

"Well, Kostylkov, congratulations on passing to the 7th grade! Have a good rest until September. Get strong and healthy! Goodbye for now!"

"Thank you," Volka replied as discreetly as a 7th-grade pupil should. "Good-bye."

When he arrived at the river bank, Hottabych, who had made himself comfortable in the shade of a mighty oak, was reading the paper aloud to Zhenya.

"I passed! I got an 'A'!" Volka whispered to his friend. Then he stretched out beside Hottabych, experiencing at least three pleasant feelings at once: the first was that he was lying in the shade; the second, that he had passed his exam so well; and the last, but by no means least-the pride of a teacher enjoying the achievements of his pupil.

Meanwhile, Hottabych had reached the section entitled "Sports News." The very first article made the friends sigh with envy.

"In the middle of July, the ice-breaker 'Ladoga,' chartered by the Central Excursion Bureau, will leave Arkhangelsk for the Arctic. Sixty-eight persons, the best workers of Moscow and Leningrad, will spend their

vacations aboard it. This promises to be a very interesting cruise." "What a trip! I'd give anything to go along," Volka said dreamily.

"You need only express your wish, O my most excellent friends, and you shall go wherever you please!" Hottabych promised, for he yearned to somehow repay his young teachers. Volka merely sighed again. Zhenya explained sadly:

"No, Hottabych, there's no question of it. Only famous people can get aboard the 'Ladoga.' "

A COMMOTION AT THE CENTRAL EXCURSION BUREAU

That very same day an old man dressed in a white suit and a straw boater and wearing queer pink embroidered slippers with turned-up toes entered the offices of the Central Excursion Bureau. He politely inquired whether he had the good fortune of being in the chambers of that high-placed establishment which granted people the fragrant joy of travel. The secretary, surprised by such a flowery question, replied in the affirmative. Then the old man inquired in the same florid language where the wise man worthy of the greatest respect sat, he, who was in charge of booking passage on the ice-breaker "Ladoga."

He was directed to a plump, bald man seated at a large desk piled high with letters.

"But please bear in mind that there are no cabins left on the 'Ladoga'," the secretary warned.

The old man did not reply. He thanked her with a nod and approached the plump man silently. In silence he made a low bow, in silence and with great dignity he handed him a roll of paper wrapped in a newspaper; then he bowed again, turned in silence and left, with the puzzled eyes of all who had witnessed this curious scene following him out.

The bald man unwrapped the newspaper. There, on his desk, was the strangest letter the Central Excursion Bureau had ever received-or, for that matter, the strangest letter ever received by any Soviet office. It was a yellow parchment scroll. A large green wax seal dangled from a golden silk cord attached to it.

"Did you ever see anything like it?" the plump man asked loudly and ran off to show it to his chief, in charge of long-range cruises.

When they had read it, his chief dropped his work and the two of them dashed off to the director.

"What's the matter? Can't you see I'm busy?" the director said.

The section chief silently unrolled the parchment scroll.

"What's that? Is it from a museum?"

"No, it's from 'Incoming mail'."

"Incoming mail?! What's in it?" After reading the contents, the director said, "Well, I've seen quite a lot in my day, but I've never received such a letter. It must have been written by a maniac."

"Even if he is a maniac, he's a collector of antiques," the section chief answered. "You try to get some genuine parchment nowadays."

"Just listen to what he's written," the director continued, forgetting that his subordinates had already read the message. "It's typical raving!"

"To the greatly respected Chief of Pleasures, the incorruptible and enlightened Chief of the Long-Range Cruise Section, may his name be renowned among the most honourable and respected Section Chiefs!"

The director read this and winked at the section chief. "He means you, I guess!" The section chief coughed in embarrassment.

"I, Hassan Abdurrakhman, the mighty Genie, the great Genie, known for my power and might in Baghdad and Damascus, in Babylon and Sumer, son of Hottab, the great King of Evil Spirits, a part of the Eternal Kingdom, whose dynasty is pleasing to Sulayman, the Son of David (on the twain be peace!), whose reign is pleasing to their hearts. Allah was overjoyed at my blessed doings and blessed me, Hassan Abdurrakhman, a Genie who worshipped him. All the kings reigning in the palaces of the Four Parts of the World, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, and the kings of the West who live in tents-all have brought their homage to me and kissed my feet in Baghdad.

"It has become known to me, O most noble of Section Chiefs, that a ship which navigates without sails and is named the "Ladoga" will soon set out on a pleasure cruise from the city of Arkhangelsk with famous people of various cities aboard. It is my wish that my two young friends, whose virtues are so many that even a short enumeration of them will not fit into this scroll, should also be among them.

"Alas, I have not been informed of how great a person's fame must be in order that he be eligible for this magnificent trip. However, no matter how great the requirements, my friends will meet them-nay, more than meet them, for it is in my power to make them princes or sheiks, tsars or kings, the most famous of the famous, the richest of the rich, the mightiest of the mighty.

"I kiss your feet seven times and seven times and send you greetings, O wise Section Chief, and request you to inform me when I and my two young companions should appear on board the above-mentioned ship, may storms and ill-fortune by-pass it on its distant and dangerous journey!"

"Signed by the hand of Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab, the Mighty Genie."

At the very bottom was Volka's address, enclosed for a reply.

"Ravings!" the director said, rolling up the scroll. "The ravings of a madman. Stick it away in the file and be done with it."

"I think we'd better answer him, or the crazy old man will be dropping in five times a day to find out about the outcome of his application. I assure you, it'll be quite impossible to work in the office," the section chief objected. A few minutes later he dictated an answer to his secretary.

WHO IS MOST FAMOUS?

Hottabych had acted unwisely in giving Volka's address for a reply. It was only by the merest chance that Volka met the postman on the stairs. What if this lucky meeting had not taken place? The letter from the Central Excursion Bureau would have been delivered to his parents; all sorts of questions would have followed, resulting in such a mess, that he didn't even care to think of it.

The younger Kostylkov did not often receive mail addressed to him, personally. In fact, not more than three or four times in all his life. That is why, when the postman said he had a letter for him, Volka was greatly surprised. When he saw the return address of the Central Excursion Bureau he was stunned. He examined the envelope carefully and even smelled it, but it only smelled of the paste on the flap. With trembling fingers he opened it and read the section chief's short but polite reply several times over without understanding a thing:

"Dear Citizen H. Abdurrakhmanov,

"We regret to inform you that we received your request too late. There are no cabins left on the 'Ladoga.'

"My best regards to your princes and sheiks.

"Sincerely yours,

I. Domosedov, Section Chief of Long-Range Cruises."

"Can it be that the old man tried to get us on the 'Ladoga'?" it suddenly occurred to Volka. He was deeply touched. "What a wonderful old man! But I don't understand which princes and sheiks this Domosedov is sending his regards to. I'll find out right away, though."

"Hottabych! Hey, Hottabych!" he shouted when he reached the river bank. "Come here for a minute, will you?" The old man was dozing in the shade of the great oak. When he heard Volka calling, he started, jumped to his feet, and shuffled over to the boy.

"Here I am, O goalie of my soul," he panted. "I await your orders."

"Come clean now. Did you write to the Central Excursion Bureau?"

"Yes, but I wanted it to be a surprise. Did you receive an answer already?"

"Sure, here it is," Volka said, showing the old man the letter.

Hottabych snatched the paper from him. After reading the tactful answer slowly, syllable by syllable, he turned purple and began to tremble all over. His eyes became bloodshot. In a great rage he ripped open his embroidered collar.

"I beg your pardon," he wheezed, "I beg your pardon! I must leave you for a few minutes to take care of that most despicable Domosedov. Oh, I know what I'll do to him! I'll annihilate him! No, that's no good! He doesn't deserve such merciful punishment. Better still, I'll turn him into a filthy rag, and on rainy days people will wipe their dirty shoes on him before entering a house. No! That's not enough to repay him for his insolent refusal!"

With these words the old man zoomed into the air. But Volka shouted sternly:

"Come back! Come back this minute!"

The old man returned obediently. His heavy grey brows were drawn together gloomily.

"Really now!" Volka shouted, truly alarmed on the section chief's account. "What's the matter! Are you crazy? Is it his fault there's no more room on the ship? After all, it's not made of rubber, it can't stretch. And will you please tell me who the sheiks and princes he refers to are?"

"You, O Volka ibn Alyosha, you and our friend Zhenya ibn Kolya, may Allah grant you both a long life. I wrote and told this most degraded of all section chiefs that he need not worry about your not being famous enough, for no matter how famous the other passengers aboard the 'Ladoga' are, I can make you, my friends, more famous still. I wrote this small-brained Domosedov-may Allah forget him completely-that he may regard you as sheiks or princes or tsars without even having seen you."

Despite the tenseness of the situation, Volka could not help laughing. He laughed so loudly, that several very serious-minded jackdaws rose noisily from the nearest tree and flew off indignantly.

"Help! That means I'm a prince!" Volka choked the words out through peals of laughter.

"I must admit, I cannot understand the reason for your laughter," Hottabych said in a wounded tone. "But if we are to discuss the question seriously, I had planned on making Zhenya a prince. I think you deserve to be a sultan."

"Honestly, you'll be the death of me yet! Then Zhenya would be a prince, while I'd be a sultan? What political backwardness!" Volka gasped

when he had finally stopped laughing. "What's so glorious about being a prince or a king? Why, they're the most good-for-nothing people in the world!"

"I'm afraid you've gone out of your mind," Hottabych said, looking anxiously at his young companion. "As I understand it, even sultans aren't good enough for you. Whom then do you consider to be famous? Name me at least one such person."

"Why, Chutkikh, or Lunin, or Kozhedub, or Pasha Angelina."

"Who is this Chutkikh, a sultan?"

"Much higher than that! He's one of the best textile specialists in the country!"

"And Lunin?"

"Lunin is the best engine driver!"

"And Kozhedub?"

"He's one of the very, very best pilots!"

"And whose wife is Pasha Angelina for you to consider her more famous than a sheik or a king?"

"She's famous in her own right. It has nothing at all to do with her husband. She's a famous tractor driver."

"O precious Volka, how can you play such tricks on an old man like me! Do you want to convince me that a plain weaver or a locomotive driver is more famous than a tsar?"

"In the first place, Chutkikh isn't a plain weaver. He's a famous innovator, known to the entire textile industry; and Lunin is a famous engineer. And in the second place, the most ordinary worker in our country is more respected than the tsar of tsars. Don't you believe me? Here, read this."

Volka handed Hottabych the paper and there, with his own eyes, he read the following heading: "Famous People of Our Country," beneath which were over a dozen photographs of fitters, agronomists, pilots, collective farmers, weavers, teachers and carpenters.

"I would never have believed you," Hottabych said with a sigh. "I would never have believed you if your words had not been corroborated on the pages of this newspaper I so respect. I beg you, O Volka, explain why everything is so different in this wonderful country of yours?"

"With pleasure," Volka answered. And sitting down on the river bank, he spoke at length and with great pride, explaining the essence of the Soviet system to Hottabych.

There is no use repeating their long conversation.

"All you have said is as wise as it is noble. And to anyone who is honest and just all this gives plenty to think about," Hottabych said candidly when his first lesson in current events was over. After a short

pause he added:

"That is all the more reason why I want you and your friend to sail on the 'Ladoga.' Believe me, I will see that it is arranged."

"But please, no rough stuff," Volka warned. "And no monkey-business. That means no fakery. For instance, don't think of making me out to be a straight 'A' pupil. I have 'B's in three subjects."

"Your every wish is my command," Hottabych replied and bowed low.

The old man was as good as his word. He did not lay a finger on a single employee of the Central Excursion Bureau.

He just arranged matters so, that when our three friends boarded the "Ladoga," they were met very warmly and were given an excellent cabin; and no one ever inquired why in the world they had been included in the passenger list—it simply did not occur to anyone to ask such a question.

To the captain's great surprise, twenty minutes before sailing time a hundred and fifty crates of oranges, as many crates of excellent grapes, two hundred crates of dates and a ton and a half of the finest Eastern delicacies were delivered to the ship. The following message was stencilled on each and every crate:

"For the passengers and the members of the fearless crew of the 'Ladoga,' from a citizen who wishes to remain anonymous."

One does not have to be especially clever to guess that these were Hottabych's gifts: he did not want the three of them to take part in the expedition at someone else's expense.

And if you ask any of the former passengers, they still cherish the kindest feelings for the "citizen who wished to remain anonymous." His gifts were well liked by all.

Now, having made it sufficiently clear to the readers how our friends found themselves aboard the "Ladoga," we can continue our story with a clear conscience.

THE UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER

If you recall, dear readers, it was a hot July noon when the ice-breaker "Ladoga" sailed from the Red Pier in the port of Arkhangelsk with a large group of excursionists on board. Our three friends, Hottabych, Volka and Zhenya, were among the passengers. Hottabych was sitting on deck, conversing solemnly with a middle-aged fitter from Sverdlovsk on the advantages of cloth shoes as compared to leather ones, pointing out the comfort people suffering from old corns found in cloth shoes.

Volka and Zhenya were leaning on the railing of the top deck. They were

as happy as only boys can be who are aboard a real ice-breaker for the first time in their lives, and, to top it all, are sailing away for a whole month, not to just any old place, but to the Arctic.

After exchanging opinions on boats, diesel ships, ice-breakers, tug-boats, schooners, trawlers, cutters, and other types of craft skimming over the surface of the Northern Dvina, the boys fell silent, enchanted by the beauty of the great river.

"Isn't that something!" Volka said in a voice that seemed to imply he was responsible for all this beauty.

"Uh-huh."

"Nobody'd believe it if you told them."

"Uh-huh!"

"I'm really glad that we. ..." Volka began after a long pause and looked around cautiously to see if Hottabych was anywhere nearby. Just in case, he continued in a whisper, "... that we've taken the old man away from Varvara Stepanovna for at least a month."

"Sure," Zhenya agreed.

"There's the Mate in charge of the passengers," Volka whispered, nodding towards a young sailor with a freckled face.

They looked with awe at the man who carried his high and romantic title so nonchalantly. His glance slid over the young passengers unseeingly and came to rest on a sailor who was leaning on the railing nearby.

"What's the matter, are you feeling homesick?"

"Well, here we are, off again for a whole month to the end of nowhere."

The boys were amazed to discover that someone might not want to go to the Arctic! What a strange fellow!

"A real sailor is a guest on shore and at home at sea!" the Passenger Mate said weightily. "Did you ever hear that saying?"

"Well, I can't say I'm a real sailor, since I'm only a waiter."

"Then get one dinner in the galley and take it to Cabin 14, to a lady named Koltsova."

"That's the same last name as Varvara Stepanovna has," Volka remarked to Zhenya.

"Uh-huh."

"She's a middle-aged lady and she caught cold on the way here," the Mate explained. "It's nothing very serious," he said, as if to calm the waiter, though the latter did not appear in any way alarmed at the lady's state of health. "She only ought to stay in her cabin a day or two and she'll be all right. And please be especially nice. She's an Honoured Teacher of the Republic."

"An Honoured Teacher! And her last name is Koltsova. What a

coincidence!" Volka whispered.

"Well, it's a very common last name, just like Ivanov," Zhenya objected in a voice that was suddenly hoarse.

"Her name and patronymic are Varvara Stepanovna," the Mate went on. The boys saw spots before their eyes.

"It's no matter that she's Varvara Stepanovna, too. That doesn't mean she's our Varvara Stepanovna," Zhenya said in an effort to reassure himself and his friend.

At this point, however, Volka recalled the conversation that had taken place in the principal's office when he was there to take his geography examination. He merely shrugged hopelessly.

"It's she all right. That's exactly who it is. I'm scared to think what'll happen to her. Why couldn't she go some place else!"

"We'll save her anyway, we just have to think of a way," Zhenya said darkly after a short but painful silence.

They sat down on a bench, thought a while, and complained of their bad luck: such a journey was really something wonderful for anyone else, but it would be nothing but a headache for them from now on. Yet, since this was the way things had turned out, they must save their teacher. But how? Why, it was all quite simple: by distracting Hottabych.

They had no need to worry today, for she would certainly be confined to her cabin till the morrow. Then they would plan their strategy as follows: one would go strolling with Varvara Stepanovna, or sit on a bench talking to her, while the other would be distracting Hottabych. For instance, Volka and Hottabych might play a game of chess, while Zhenya and Varvara Stepanovna took a stroll down the deck. Volka and Hottabych could be on deck, while Zhenya and Varvara Stepanovna were talking somewhere far away, in a cabin or someplace. The only points remaining to be cleared up were what they were supposed to do when everyone went ashore together or gathered for meals in the mess hall.

"What if we disguise her?" Volka suggested.

"What do you want to do-stick a beard on her?" Zhenya snapped. "Nonsense. Make-up won't save her. We'll have to think it over carefully."

"Ahoy, my young friends! Where are you?" Hottabych shouted from below.

"We're here, we're coming right down."

They went down to the promenade deck.

"I and my honourable friend here are having an argument about the Union of South Africa," Hottabych said, introducing them to his companion.

Things were going from bad to worse. If the old man began advertising his knowledge of geography, the passengers would surely laugh at him; he might very well become offended, and what might happen then did not bear thinking about.

"Who's right, my young friends? Isn't Pretoria the capital of the Union of South Africa?"

"Sure it is," the boys agreed.

They were amazed. How had the old man come by this correct information? Maybe from the papers? Naturally. That was the only answer.

"My honourable friend here insists it's Cape Town, not Pretoria," Hottabych said triumphantly. "We also argued about how far above us the stratosphere is. I said that one could not draw a definite line between the troposphere and the stratosphere, since it is higher or lower in various parts of the world. And also that the line of the horizon, which, as one can ascertain from the science of geography, is no more than a figment of our imagination...." .

"Hottabych, I want a word with you in private," Volka interrupted sternly. They walked off to a side. "Tell me the truth, was it you who filched my geography book?"

"May I be permitted to know what you mean by that strange " word? If you mean, O Volka, that I... What's the matter now, O anchor of my heart? You're as pale as a ghost."

Volka's jaw dropped. His gaze became fixed on something behind the old Genie's back.

Hottabych was about to turn round to see what it was, but Volka wailed:

"Don't turn around! Please, don't turn around! Hottabych, my sweet, dear Hottabych!"

Nevertheless, the old man did turn around.

Coming towards them, arm in arm with another elderly lady, was Varvara Stepanovna Koltsova, an Honoured Teacher of the Republic, the 6B geography teacher of Moscow Secondary School No. 245.

Hottabych approached her slowly. With a practised gesture he yanked a hair from his beard, and then another.

"Don't!" Volka yelled in horror, as he grabbed Hottabych's hand. "She's not to blame! You've no right to!"

Zhenya silently tackled Hottabych from the rear and gripped him as firmly as he could.

The old man's companion looked at this strange scene in utter amazement.

"Boys!" Varvara Stepanovna commanded, apparently not at all surprised at meeting her pupils on the ice-breaker. "Behave yourselves! Leave the old man alone! Didn't you hear me?! Kostylkov! Bogorad! Do you hear?"

"He'll turn you into a toad if we do!" Volka cried frantically, feeling that he could not manage Hottabych.

"Or into a chopping-block on which butchers carve mutton!" Zhenya added. "Run, Varvara Stepanovna! Hurry up and hide before he breaks loose!"

What Volka said is true!"

"What nonsense!" Varvara Stepanovna said, raising her voice. "Children, did you hear what I said?!"

By then Hottabych had wrenched free from his young friends and quickly tore the hairs in two. The boys shut their eyes in horror.

However, they opened them when they heard Varvara Stepanovna thanking someone. She was holding a bouquet of flowers and a large bunch of ripe bananas.

Hottabych replied by bowing with a flourish and touching first his forehead and then his heart.

When they were back in their cabin, the three friends had a show-down.

"Oh, Volka, why didn't you tell me right away, right after the examination, the very first day of our happy acquaintance, that I failed you by my over-confident and ignorant prompting? You've offended me. If you had only told me, I wouldn't have bothered you with my annoying gratitude. Then you could have easily prepared for your re-examination, as is becoming an enlightened youth like you."

So spoke Hottabych, and there was real hurt in his voice.

"But you'd have turned Varvara Stepanovna into a chopping-block for carving mutton. No, Hottabych, I know you only too well. We spent all these days in terrible fear for her life. Tell me, would you have changed her into a chopping-block?"

Hottabych sighed.

"Yes, I would have, there's no use denying it. Either that or into a terrible toad."

"See! Is that what she deserves?"

"Why, if anyone ever dares to turn this noble woman into a chopping-block or a toad he'll have to deal with me first!" the old man cried hotly and added, "I bless the day you induced me to learn the alphabet and taught me how to read the papers. Now I am always up-to-date and well informed on which sea is being built, and where. And I also bless the day Allah gave me the wisdom to 'filch' your geography book-that's the right expression, isn't it, O Volka? For that truly wise and absorbing book has opened before me the blessed expanses of true science and has saved me from administering that which I, in my blindness, considered a deserving punishment for your highly respected teacher. I mean Varvara Stepanovna."

"I guess that takes care of that!" Volka said.

"It sure does," Zhenya agreed.

WHAT INTERFERES WITH SLEEPING?

They were having good sailing weather. For three days and three nights they sailed in open seas and only towards the end of the third day did they enter a region of scattered ice.

The boys were playing checkers in the lounge, when an excited Hottabych burst in on them, holding on to the brim of his old straw hat.

"My friends," he said with a broad smile, "go and have a look: the whole world, as far as the eye can see, is covered with sugar and diamonds!"

We can excuse Hottabych these funny words, as never before in his nearly forty centuries of living had he seen a single mound of ice worth speaking of.

Everyone in the lounge rushed on deck and discovered thousands of snow-white drifting ice-floes sparkling and glittering in the bright rays of the midnight sun, moving silently towards the "Ladoga." Soon the first ice-floes crunched and crashed against the rounded steel stem of the boat.

Late that night (but it was as bright and sunny as on a clear noonday) the passengers saw a group of islands in the distance. This was the first glimpse they had of the majestic and sombre panorama of Franz Joseph Land. They saw the gloomy, naked cliffs and mountains covered with glittering glaciers which resembled sharp, pointed clouds that had been pressed close to the harsh land.

"It's time to go to bed, I guess," Volka said when everyone had had his fill of looking at the far islands. "There's really nothing to do, but I don't feel like sleeping. It all comes from not being used to sleeping while the sun is shining!"

"O blessed one, it seems to me that it is not the sun which is interfering, but something else entirely," Hottabych suggested timidly.

However, no one paid attention to his words.

For a while, the boys wandered up and down the decks. There were less and less people aboard. Finally they, too, went back to their cabin. Soon the only people on the ship who were not asleep were the crew members on duty.

It was quiet and peaceful aboard the "Ladoga." From every cabin there came the sound of snoring or deep breathing, as if this were not taking place on a ship some two and a half thousand kilometres from the mainland, in the harsh and treacherous Barents Sea, but in a cosy rest home somewhere near Moscow, during the afternoon "quiet hour." The shades were drawn on the port-holes, just as on the windows in rest homes, to keep out the bright sunshine.

SHIPWRECKED?

However, it soon became clear that there was a very tangible difference between the "Ladoga" and a rest home. Apart from the Crimean earthquake, old-timers at rest homes do not recall having been tossed out of their beds in their sleep. The passengers had just fallen asleep when a sharp jerk threw them from their berths.

That very moment the steady hum of the engines stopped. In the silence which followed, one could hear the slamming of doors and the sound of running feet, as the people rushed out of their cabins to find out what had happened. There were shouts of command coming from the deck. Volka was lucky in tumbling out of the top berth without major injuries. He immediately jumped to his feet and began to rub his sore spots. As he was still half asleep, he decided that it had been his own fault and was about to climb up again when the murmur of anxious voices coming from the corridor convinced him that the reason was much more serious than he thought.

"Perhaps we hit an underground reef?" he wondered, pulling on his clothes. This thought, far from frightening him, gave him a strange and burning feeling of anxious exhilaration. "Golly! This is a real adventure! Gee! There isn't a single ship within a thousand kilometres, and maybe our wireless doesn't work!"

He imagined a most exciting picture: they were shipwrecked, their supplies of drinking water and food were coming to an end, but the passengers and crew of the "Ladoga" were calm and courageous-as Soviet people should be. Naturally, he, Volka Kostylkov, had the greatest will power. Yes, Vladimir Kostylkov could look danger in the face. He would always be cheerful and outwardly carefree, he would comfort those who were despondent. When the captain of the "Ladoga" would succumb to the inhuman strain and deprivation, he, Volka, would rightly take over command of the ship.

"What has disturbed the sleep so necessary to your young system?" Hottabych asked and yawned, interrupting Volka's day-dreams.

"I'll find out right away, Hottabych. I don't want you to worry about anything," Volka said comfortingly and ran off.

Gathered on the spardeck near the captain's bridge were about twenty half-dressed passengers. They were all discussing something quietly. In order to raise their spirits, Volka assumed a cheerful, carefree expression and said courageously:

"Be calm, everyone! Calmness above all! There's no need to panic!"

"That's very true. Those are golden words, young man! And that is why you should go right back to your cabin and go to sleep without fear," one of the passengers replied with a smile. "By the way, no one here is feeling at all panicky."

Everyone laughed, to Volka's considerable embarrassment. Besides, it was rather chilly on deck and he decided to run down and get his coat.

"Calmness above all!" he said to Hottabych, who was waiting for him below. "There's no reason to get panicky. Before two days are out, a giant ice-breaker will come for us and set us afloat once again. We certainly could have done it ourselves, but can you hear? The engines have stopped working. Something went wrong, but no one can find out what it is. There will surely be deprivations, but let's hope that no one will die."

Volka was listening to himself speak with pleasure. He had never dreamt he could calm people so easily and convincingly.

"O woe is me!" the old man cried suddenly, shoving his bare feet into his famous slippers. "If you perish, I'll not survive you. Have we really come upon a shoal? Alas, alas! It would be much better if the engines were making noise. And just look at me! Instead of using my magic powers for more important things, I..."

"Hottabych," Volka interrupted sternly, "tell me this minute: what have you done?"

"Why, nothing much. It's just that I so wanted you to sleep soundly, that I permitted myself to order the engines to stop making noise."

"Oh, no!" Volka cried in horror. "Now I know what happened! You ordered the engines to be still, but they can't work silently. That's why the ship stopped so suddenly. Take back your order before the boilers explode!"

"I hear and I obey," a rather frightened Hottabych answered shakily.

That very moment the engines began to hum again and the "Ladoga" continued on its way as before. Meanwhile, the captain, the chief engineer and everyone else on board were at a loss to explain why the engines had stopped so suddenly and mysteriously and had resumed working again just as suddenly and mysteriously.

Only Hottabych and Volka knew what had happened, but for obvious reasons they said nothing. Not even to Zhenya. But then, Zhenya had slept soundly through it all.

"If there was ever an international contest to see who's the soundest sleeper, I bet Zhenya would get first prize and be the world champion," Volka said.

Hottabych giggled ingratiatingly, though he had no idea what a contest was, and especially an international one, or what a champion was. But he was trying to appease Volka.

Yet, this in no way staved off the unpleasant conversation. Volka sat

down on the edge of Hottabych's berth and said:

"You know what? Let's have a man-to-man talk."

"I am all ears, 0 Volka," Hottabych replied with exaggerated cheerfulness.

"Did you ever try counting how many years older you are than me?"

"Somehow, the thought never entered my head, but if you permit me to, I'll gladly do so."

"Never mind, I figured it out already. You're three thousand, seven hundred and nineteen years older than me-or exactly two hundred and eighty-seven times! And when people see us together on the deck or in the lounge they probably think: how nice it is that these boys have such a respectable, wise and elderly gentleman to keep an eye on them. Isn't that right? What's the matter? Why don't you answer?"

But Hottabych, hanging his unruly grey head, seemed to have taken a mouthful of water.

"But how do things really stand? Actually, I find that I'm suddenly responsible for your life and the lives of all the passengers, because since it was me who let you out of the bottle and since you nearly sank a whole ice-breaker, it means I'm responsible for everything. I deserve to have my head chopped off."

"Just let anyone try to chop off such a noble head as yours! Hottabych cried.

"All right, never mind that. Don't interrupt. To continue: Pi sick and tired of your miracles. There's no doubt about it, you're really a very mighty Genie (Hottabych puffed out his chest), but as concerns modern times and modern technical development; you don't know much more than a new-born babe. Is the clear?"

"Alas, it is."

"Well then, let's agree: whenever you feel like performing some miracle, consult other people."

"I'll consult you, 0 Volka, and if you won't be on hand, or : you're busy preparing for a re-examination (Volka winced), then I'll consult Zhenya."

"Do you swear?"

"I swear," the old man exclaimed and struck his chest with his fist.

"And now, back to bed," Volka ordered.

"Aye, aye, Sir!" Hottabych answered loudly. He had already managed to pick up some nautical terms.

HOTTABYCH AT HIS BEST

By morning the "Ladoga" had entered a zone of heavy fogs. ; crawled ahead slowly and every five minutes its siren wailed loudly, breaking the eternal silence.

This was done in accordance with the rules of navigation. then it is foggy, all vessels must sound their fog horns, no matter whether they are in the busiest harbours or in the empty wastes of the Arctic Ocean. This is done to prevent collisions.

The sound of the "Ladoga's" siren depressed the passengers.

It was dull and damp on deck, and boring in the cabins. That is why every seat in the lounge was occupied. Some passengers were playing chess, some were playing checkers, others were reading. Then they tired of these pastimes, too. Finally they decided to sing.

They sang all together and one at a time; they danced to the accompaniment of a guitar and an accordion. A famous Uzbek cotton-grower danced to an accompaniment provided by Zhenya. There really should have been a tambourine, but since there was none, Zhenya tapped out the rhythm quite well on an enamelled tray. Everyone was pleased except the Uzbek, but he was very polite and praised Zhenya, too. Then a young man from a Moscow factory began doing card tricks. This time everyone except Hottabych thought it was grand.

He called Volka out into the corridor.

"Permit me, O Volka, to entertain these kind people with several simple miracles."

Volka recalled how these "simple miracles" had nearly ended in the circus and protested vigorously, "Don't even think of it!" Finally, however, he agreed, because Hottabych was looking at him with such sad-dog eyes.

"All right, but remember-just card tricks and maybe something with the ping-pong balls, if you want to."

"I shall never forget your wise generosity," Hottabych said gratefully, and they returned to the lounge. The young worker was in the midst of a really good trick. He offered anyone in the audience to choose a card, look at it, replace it, and then shuffle the deck. Then he shuffled it too, and the top card always turned out to be the right one.

After he had received his well-earned applause and returned to his seat, Hottabych asked to be permitted to entertain the gathering with several simple tricks. That's how the boastful old man put it-simple.

Naturally, everyone agreed. They applauded before he even began.

Bowing smartly to all sides like an old-timer on the stage, Hottabych

took two ping-pong balls from a table and threw them into the air. Suddenly, there were four balls; he threw them up again and they became eight, then thirty-two. He began juggling all thirty-two balls, and then they disappeared and were found to be in thirty-two pockets of thirty-two people in the audience. Then they flew out of the pockets, formed a chain and began spinning around a bowing Hottabych like sputniks until they became a white hoop. Hottabych put this large hoop on Varvara Stepanovna's lap with a low bow. The hoop began to flatten out until it turned into a roll of excellent silk. Hottabych cut it into pieces with Volka's pen-knife. The pieces of silk flew into the air like birds and wound themselves into turbans of remarkable beauty around the heads of the amazed audience.

Hottabych listened to the applause blissfully. Then he snapped his fingers. The turbans turned into pigeons which flew out through the open port-holes and disappeared. Everyone was now convinced that the old man in the funny oriental slippers was one of the greatest conjurors.

Hottabych wallowed in the applause. The boys knew him well enough to understand how dangerous such unanimous and exciting approval was for him.

"Just wait and see! Watch him go to town now," Zhenya whispered in a worried voice. "I have a funny feeling, that's all."

"Don't worry, we have a very strict agreement on this point."

"One minute, my friends," Hottabych said to the applauding passengers. "Will you permit me to...."

He yanked a single hair from his beard. Suddenly a shrill whistle sounded on deck. They could hear the heavy clatter of running feet.

"That's the militia coming to fine someone!" Zhenya joked. "Somebody's jumped overboard at full speed!" No one had time to laugh, because the "Ladoga" shuddered and something clanged menacingly below. For the second time that day the ship came to a stop.

"See! What did I say!" Zhenya hissed and looked at Hottabych with loathing. "He couldn't control himself. Just look at him boast! Golly! I've never met a more conceited, boastful and undisciplined Genie in my whole life!"

"Are you up to your old tricks again, Hottabych? You swore yesterday that...."

There was such shouting in the lounge that Volka didn't bother lowering his voice.

"Oh, no! No! Do not insult me with such suspicions, O serpent among boys, for I have never broken the smallest promise, to say nothing of an oath. I swear I know no more than you do about the reasons for our sudden stop."

"A snake?" Volka shouted angrily. "Oh, so on top of everything else, I'm a snake! Thank you, Hottabych! My best merci to you!"

"Not a snake, a serpent, for know ye that a serpent is the living embodiment of wisdom."

This time the old man was really not to blame. The "Ladoga" had lost its way in the fog and gone aground. Passengers crowded the deck, but they had difficulty in even making out the rails. However, by leaning over the side near the bow they could see the propellers churning up the dark unfriendly waters.

Half an hour passed, but all attempts to get the ship off the shoal by putting it in reverse ended in failure. Then the captain ordered the spry boatswain to pipe all on deck.

Everyone except those standing watch gathered on the spardeck. The captain said, "Comrades, this is an emergency. There's only one way to get off the shoal under our own steam and that's transfer the coal from the bow to the stern; then we'll be able make free of the shoal. If everyone pitches in, it won't take more than ten or twelve hours to do the job. The boatswain will divide you into teams. Put on your worst clothes and let's start the ball rolling.

"You, boys, and you, Hassan Hottabych, need not worry. it's no job for you: the boys are too young and it's a little too late for you to carry heavy loads."

"What do you mean by saying I can't carry heavy loads?" Hottabych replied scornfully. "Please be informed that no one present here can equal me in weight-lifting, O most respected captain."

The other passengers began to smile.

"What an old man!" "Listen to him boast." "Just look at that muscle-man!"

"There's nothing to laugh at, he feels offended. It's no fun be old."

"See for yourself!" Hottabych shouted. He grabbed his two young friends and, to the general amazement, began juggling them as if they were plastic billiard balls stead of sturdy thirteen-year-old boys. The applause which followed was so deafening, the whole scene might very well have taken place at a weight-lifting contest and not on board a ship in danger.

"I take my words back," the captain said solemnly after the applause had died down. "And now, let's get to work! There's time to waste!"

"Hottabych," Volka said, -taking the old man off to a side "what's the use of dragging coal from one hold to another for twelve long hours? I think you should do something to get the ship off the shoal."

"That's not within my powers," the old man answered sadly "I thought of it already. Naturally, I can pull it off the rocks, but then the bottom will be all scratched and ripped, and I won't b able to fix it, because I never saw what a ship looks like on the bottom. Then we'll certainly drown in no time."

"Think again, Hottabych! Maybe you'll think of some thing!"

"I'll try my best, O compass of my soul," the old man replied. After a short pause he asked, "What if I make the rocks disappear?"

"Oh, Hottabych! How smart you are!" Volka said and began to shake his hand. "That's a wonderful idea."

"I hear and I obey."

The first emergency team was down in the hold, loading the first iron bins with coal, when the "Ladoga" suddenly lurched and then began to spin around in a whirlpool over the spot where there had just been a shoal. In another minute, the ship would have broken to bits, had not Volka sense enough to tell Hottabych to make the whirlpool disappear. The sea became calm; the "Ladoga" spun around a while longer from sheer force of inertia. Then it continued on its way.

Once again, no one but Hottabych and Volka knew what he happened.

Ahead were more exciting days, each unlike the other, as they journeyed across little-known seas and channels, past bleak islands upon which no human foot had ever stepped. The passengers often left the ship to go ashore on deserted cliffs and on islands where polar station teams greeted them with rifle salvos. Our three friends joined the rest in climbing glaciers, wandering over the naked stones of basalt plateaux, jumping from ice-floe to ice-floe over black open patches of water, and hunting polar bears. The fearless Hottabych dragged one bear aboard the "Ladoga" by the scruff of its neck. Under his influence the animal soon became as tame and playful as a cat, and so provided many happy hours for both passengers and crew. Now the bear often tours with circuses, and many of our readers have undoubtedly seen him. His name is Kuzya.

"SALAAM, SWEET OMAR!"

After stopping off at Rudolph Island, the "Ladoga" began its return journey. The passengers were worn out from the mass of new impressions, from the sun which shone round the clock from the frequent fogs and endless crashing of ice against the stem and sides of the ship. At each stop there were less and less passengers who wished to go ashore on deserted islands, and towards the end of the journey our friends and two or three other tireless explorers were the only ones to take advantage of a chance to climb the inhospitable cliffs.

One morning the captain said, "Well, this is the last time you're going ashore. There's no sense stopping the ship for six or seven people."

That is why Volka talked the others going ashore into staying there as

long as possible, in order to really have one good last look at the islands. They could do it in peace since Hottabych, who was usually in a rush to get back, was staying behind to play chess with the captain.

"Volka," Zhenya said mysteriously when they dragged their feet aboard the "Ladoga" three hours later. "Come on down to the cabin! I want to show you something. Here, look at this," he continued, after shutting the door tightly. He pulled a longish object from under his coat. "What d'you think it is? I found it on the opposite side of the island. Right near the water."

Zhenya was holding a small copper vessel the size of a decanter. It was all green from age and brine.

"We should give it to the captain right away," Volka said excitedly. "Some expedition probably put a letter inside and threw it into the water, hoping someone would come to the rescue."

"That's what I thought at first, too, but then I decided nothing would happen if we opened it first to have a look inside. It's interesting, isn't it?"

"It sure is."

Zhenya turned pale from excitement. He quickly knocked off the tar-like substance that covered the mouth of the bottle. Under it was a heavy lead cap covered with a seal. Zhenya had great difficulty prying it loose.

"And now we'll see what's inside," he said, turning it upside-down over his berth.

Before he had time to finish the sentence, clouds of black smoke began pouring from the bottle, filling the entire cabin. It became dark and choky. Presently, the thick vapour condensed and became an unsightly old man with an angry face and a pair of eyes that burnt like coals. He fell to his knees and knocked his forehead on the floor so hard that the things hanging on the cabin wall swayed as if the ship was rolling.

"O Prophet of Allah, do not kill me!" he shouted.

"I'd like to ask you something," a frightened but curious Volka interrupted his wailing. "If I'm not mistaken, you mean the former King Solomon, don't you?"

"Yes, O miserable youth! Sulayman, the Son of David (may the days of the twain be prolonged on earth!)."

"I don't know about who's miserable," Volka objected calmly, "but as far as your Sulayman is concerned-his days can in no way be prolonged. That's out completely: he's dead."

"You lie, wretch, and will pay dearly for it!"

"There's nothing to get mad about. That Eastern king die two thousand nine hundred and nineteen years ago. You ca look it up in the Encyclopaedia."

"Who opened the bottle?" the old man asked in a business like way,

having obviously accepted Volka's information and not appearing to be too saddened by it.

"I did, but you really shouldn't thank me," Zhenya said modestly.

"There is no God but Allah!" the stranger exclaimed. "Rejoice, O undeserving brat."

"Why should I rejoice? It's you who've been freed from your prison, and you should be the one to rejoice. What's there for me to rejoice about?"

"Rejoice, because you must die an ill death this very hour"

"That's what I call real mean! After all, I freed you from the copper vessel. If not for me, who-knows how many thousands of years longer you'd have to lie around in smoke and soot."

"Don't tire me with idle chatter! Ask of me only what mode of death you choose and in what manner I shall slay you! Gr-r-r!"

"I'll thank you not to act so fierce! And anyway, what's that all about?" Zhenya flared up.

"Know, O undeserving boy, that I am one of the Genies who disobeyed Sulayman, David's Son (on the twain be peace!), whereupon Sulayman sent his minister, Asaf, son of Barakhiya, to seize me. And this Vizier brought me against my will and led me in bonds to Sulayman and he placed me standing before him. When Sulayman saw me, he sent for this bottle, shut me up therein and stoppered it over with lead."

"Good for him!" Zhenya whispered to Volka.

"What are you whispering about?" the old man asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Zhenya answered hurriedly.

"Take care!" the old man warned. "I am not one to have tricks played upon me. To continue: he imprisoned me in the bottle and ordered his Genies to throw me into the ocean. There I abode a hundred years, during which time I said in my heart, 'Whoso shall release me, him will I enrich for ever and ever.' But the full century went by and, when no one set me free, I entered upon the second five score saying, 'Whoso shall release me, for him I shall open the hoards of the Earth.' Still, no one set me free, and thus four hundred years passed away. Then quoth I, 'Whoso shall release me, for him will I fulfil three wishes.' Yet no one set me free. Thereupon I waxed wroth and said to myself, 'Whoso shall release me from this time forth, him will I slay, and I will give him choice of what death he will die,' and now, as you have released me, I give you full choice of death."

"But it's not at all logical to kill your saviour! It's illogical and downright ungrateful," Zhenya objected heatedly.

"Logic has nothing to do with it," the Genie interrupted harshly.

"Choose the death that most appeals to you and do not detain me, for I am terrible in my wrath!"

"May I ask you something?" Volka said, raising his hand.

But the Genie glared at him so frightfully, it made Volka's knees tremble.

"Well then, will you at least permit me to ask a question?" Zhenya pleaded with such despair that the Genie relented.

"All right. But be brief."

"You say that you spent several thousand years in this copper vessel, but it's even too small to hold your hand. How should the whole of you fit in it?"

"What! Do you not believe that I was there?"

"I'll never believe it until I see you inside with my own eyes."

"Well then, look and be convinced," the Genie roared. He shook and became a smoke which condensed and entered the jar little by little, while the boys clapped softly in excitement.

More than half the vapour had disappeared into the vessel. Zhenya, with bated breath, had the stopper ready to imprison the Genie once again, but the old man seemed to change his mind, for he filtered out again and assumed a human form.

"Oh, no you don't!" he said, squinting slyly and shaking a hooked and dirty finger in front of Zhenya's face, while the boy hurriedly slipped the stopper in his pocket. "You didn't want to outsmart me, did you, O despicable brat? What a terrible memory I have! I nearly forgot that a thousand one hundred and forty-two years ago a fisherman fooled me in just the same manner. He asked me the very same question and I trustingly wished to prove that I had indeed been in the vessel. So I turned into smoke again and entered the jar, while the fisherman snatched up the leaden cap with the seal and stoppered therewith the mouth of it. Then he tossed it back into the sea. Oh no, you can't play that trick on me twice!"

"Why, I had no intention of fooling you," Zhenya lied in a shaky voice, feeling that now he was a goner for sure.

"Hurry and choose what manner of death you will die and detain me no longer, for I am weary of all this talk!"

"All right," Zhenya said after thinking a bit. "But promise me that I'll die in exactly the way I choose."

"I swear!" the Genie promised solemnly and his eyes burnt with a devilish fire.

"Well, then," Zhenya said and swallowed hard. "Well then... I want to die of old age."

"Good for you!" Volka shouted.

The Genie turned purple from rage and cried, "But your old age is still very far off. You are still so young!"

"That's all right," Zhenya answered courageously, "I can wait."

When Volka heard this, he laughed happily, but the Genie began to curse

in Arabic as he dashed back and forth in the cabin, tossing aside everything in his way in helpless rage.

This went on for a good five minutes until he finally seemed to come to a decision. He laughed so fiendishly as to give the boys goose-pimples. Standing before Zhenya, he said maliciously:

"There is no denying it, you are cunning. But Omar Asaf ibn Hottab is more cunning than you, O despicable one."

"Omar Asaf ibn Hottab?" the boys cried in unison. The Genie was trembling with wrath and bellowed:

"Silence! Or I'll destroy you immediately! Yes, I am Omar Asaf ibn Hottab, and I am more cunning than this brat! I'll fulfil his wish and he will surely die of old age. But," he said, looking at the boys triumphantly, "his old age will come upon him before you count to a hundred!"

"Help!" Zhenya cried in his usual voice. "Help!" he groaned in a deep basso a few seconds later. "Help!" he squeaked in a trembling old man's voice a few moment's later. "Help! I'm dying!"

Volka looked on horror-struck as Zhenya quickly turned into a youth, then into a grown man with a long black beard; then his beard turned to grey and he became middle-aged; and, finally, he became a bald, bony, scrawny old man. All would have been over in a few seconds if Omar Asaf, who was gleefully watching Zhenya's quick deterioration, had not exclaimed:

"Oh, if my unfortunate brother were only here now! How happy he would be at my triumph!"

"Wait!" Volka shouted. "Tell me, was your brother's name Hassan Abdurrahman?"

"How did you discover that?" Omar Asaf asked in amazement. "Do not remind me of him, for my heart is rent at the memory of poor Hassan. Yes, I had a brother named so, but all the worse for you, for reopening my terrible wounds!"

"If I tell you your brother is alive and bring him to you, alive and healthy, will you spare Zhenya then?"

"Oh, if I could only see my dear Hassan! Oh, then your friend would remain alive until he aged naturally and that will not happen for many and many a year. But if you deceive me ... I swear, neither of you will escape my rightful wrath!"

"Then wait a minute, just one minute!" Volka shouted.

A few moments later, he rushed into the lounge where Hottabych was engrossed in his game of chess with the captain.

"Dear Hottabych, hurry! Let's run back to the cabin, there's a great joy awaiting you there."

"I can think of no greater joy than to check-mate my sweetest friend, the captain," Hottabych replied solemnly, studying the board intently.

"Hottabych, we can't spare a minute! I beg you, come below with me!"

"All right," Hottabych replied and moved his castle. "Check! Run along, Volka. I'll be with you as soon as I win, and, according to my calculations, this will be in about three more moves."

"We'll see about that yet," the captain replied cheerfully. "Three moves indeed! Just you let me see...."

"Yes, yes, do see," the old man chuckled. "You won't think of anything anyway. I can wait. I'll be only too happy to wait."

"We've no time to wait!" Volka wailed in despair, and knocked all the figures off the board. "If you don't come below with me this minute, both Zhenya and I will die a horrible death! Hurry! Run!"

"You're behaving atrociously," Hottabych grumbled, but followed Volka out nonetheless.

"That means it's a draw!" the captain shouted happily, pleased to have escaped a completely hopeless situation.

"No, sir! What do you mean a draw?" Hottabych objected and was ready to turn back.

But Volka shouted angrily:

"Sure it's a draw! It's a typical draw!" and shoved the old man into their cabin, where Omar Asaf was about to fulfil his terrible threat.

"Who's the old man?" Hottabych asked, seeing a decrepit old man moaning on the berth. Actually, but a few short moments ago, he had been a thirteen-year-old boy named Zhenya Bogorad. "And who's that other old man?" he continued, noticing Omar Asaf. Suddenly he turned pale. Not trusting his eyes, he took several hesitant steps forward and whispered, "Salaam, sweet Omar!"

"Is that you, O my dear Hassan Abdurrahman?" Omar Asaf cried.

The brothers fell into each other's arms, for they had been separated for nearly three thousand years.

At first, Volka was so touched by this unusual meeting of brothers in the midst of the Arctic icebergs, and so happy for Hottabych's sake, that he completely forgot about the unfortunate Zhenya. Soon a barely audible groan from the berth reminded him that urgent aid was needed.

"Help!" he cried and rushed to separate Hottab's two sons. "A person's dying and they...."

"Help, I'm dying!" the old man Zhenya croaked, as if to corroborate Volka's words. Hottabych looked at him in surprise and asked:

"Who is this white-haired old man, and how does he come to be lying in our friend Zhenya's bed?"

"But this is Zhenya," Volka wailed. "Save him, Hottabych!"

"I beg your pardon, O dearest Hassan," Omar Asaf said irritably to his newly-found brother. "I shall have to interrupt these pleasant moments of

reunion in order to fulfil my promise."

With these words he went over to the berth, touched Zhenya's shoulder, and hissed:

"Ask forgiveness before it is too late."

"Forgiveness? Of whom?" the old man Zhenya croaked.

"Of me, O despicable youth!"

"What for?"

"For trying to trick me."

"You should ask my forgiveness," Zhenya objected. "I saved you and you want to kill me for it. I won't ask your forgiveness!"

"Be it as you wish," Omar Asaf agreed maliciously. "I do not insist. But bear in mind that you shall die in a few seconds if you do not."

"So what? Who cares?" Zhenya whispered proudly if weakly, though he certainly did care.

"Omar, my sweet!" Hottabych interrupted kindly but firmly. "Don't cloud our long-awaited reunion by a dishonest act. You must immediately and unconditionally fulfil the promise given to my precious friend, Volka ibn Alyosha. And please bear in mind that the most noble Zhenya is a very good friend of mine to."

Omar Asaf ground his teeth in helpless rage. Yet, he took hold of himself and muttered:

"Change, O insolent youth, and be as you were before!" "Now you're talking," Zhenya said.

Everyone present had the pleasure of witnessing a most unusual sight: a dying old man turned into a thirteen-year-old boy.

First, his withered, sunken cheeks became rosy; then, his bald head was covered with white hair which soon turned black, as did his heavy beard. Feeling stronger, Zhenya hopped off the berth and winked at his friends happily. Standing before them was a husky man of forty, who differed from other men of his age in that his beard kept on shrinking until it finally turned into a barely noticeable fringe of fluff which soon disappeared completely. The man was becoming smaller in height and narrower in the shoulders. Finally, he took on Zhenya Bogorad's usual appearance.

Thus, Zhenya was now the only person in the world who could say. "Long ago, when I was still an old man," the same as millions of old men say, "When I was still a young rascal."

OMAR ASAF BARES HIS CLAWS

"There's one thing I can't understand," Omar Asaf said thoughtfully as

he shivered with cold. "I clearly heard Sulayman's Genies say, 'Let's throw him-meaning me-into the West Ethiopian Sea.' That's why I thought that if I was ever lucky enough to look upon the sun and earth again, it would be near the shores of sunny Africa. But this," and he pointed to the island fast disappearing through the port-hole, "this is not at all like Africa. Isn't it so, my dear brother Hassan?"

"You are right, my dear Omar Asaf, one so pleasing to my heart. We are now near other shores, quite a distance from Africa. We are now...."

"I know! Really, I know!" Volka interrupted and did a jig from excitement. "Golly! Now I know! Now I know!"

"What do you know?" Omar Asaf asked haughtily.

"Now I know how you came to be in the Arctic."

"O insolent and boastful boy, how unpleasant I find your undue pride!" Omar Asaf said in disgust. "How can you understand something which remains a mystery even to me, the wisest and most powerful of all Genies! Well then, express your opinion, so that I and my dear brother may have a good laugh at your expense."

"That's as you wish. You can laugh if you want to. But it's all because of the Gulf Stream."

"Because of what?" Omar Asaf asked acidly.

"The Gulf Stream, the warm current which brought you to the Arctic from the Southern Seas."

"What nonsense!" Omar Asaf smirked, turning to his brother for support. But his brother said nothing.

"It's not rubbish at all," Volka began.

But Omar Asaf corrected him:

"I did not say 'rubbish,' I said 'nonsense.' "

"It's neither rubbish nor nonsense," Volka replied with annoyance. "I got an 'A' in geography for the Gulf Stream."

Since Zhenya supported Volka's scientific theory, Hottabych also supported him.

Omar Asaf, seeing that he was a minority of one, pretended to agree about the Gulf Stream, but actually concealed a grudge against Volka and his friend.

"I am tired of arguing with you, O conceited boy," he said, forcing a yawn. "I am tired and want to sleep. Hurry and bring a fan and keep away the flies while I rest."

"In the first place, there are no flies here. In the second place, what right have you to order me about?" Volka asked indignantly.

"There will be flies soon enough," Omar Asaf muttered through clenched teeth. And sure enough, swarms of flies began buzzing about the cabin.

"We can manage without a fan," Volka said in a friendlier tone, making

believe he did not understand the humiliating nature of Omar Asaf's demand.

He opened first the door, then the port-hole; a strong draught carried the flies out into the corridor.

"All the same, you'll fan me!" Omar Asaf said capriciously, ignoring Hottabych's attempts at calming him.

"No, I won't! No one has ever made me fulfil humiliating orders."

"Then I'll be the first to do so."

"No you won't!"

"Omar, my sweet!" Hottabych said, trying to avert the imminent quarrel.

But Omar Asaf, who had turned black with rage, waved him away angrily.

"I'd rather die than fulfil your whims!" Volka shouted.

"Then you'll die very soon, as soon as the Sun sets," Omar Asaf announced, smiling disgustingly.

Suddenly, Volka had a wonderful idea.

"If that's the case, then tremble, you despicable Genie!" he shouted in his most terrible voice. "You have tried my patience too long, and I must stop the Sun! It will not go down today, or tomorrow, or the day after. You have only yourself to blame!"

Volka was taking a big chance. If Hottabych had had time to tell his brother that the Arctic Sun shone twenty-four hours a day at this time of the year, then all was lost.

But in reply to Volka's words, Omar Asaf scoffed, "Braggart of braggarts! Boaster of boasters! I, too, like to boast at times, but even in my greatest rage I have never promised to stop the course of that great celestial body. Not even Sulayman, the Son of David (on the twain be peace!), could do that."

Volka saw that he was saved. And not only saved, but that he could take Hottabych's disagreeable brother in hand.

Hottabych, meanwhile, winked approvingly at Volka. As for Zhenya, there is no need to say he was delighted. He had guessed Volka's idea and was aglow from excitement, anticipating Omar Asaf's imminent downfall.

"Rest assured, Omar Asaf. If I said I'll stop the Sun, you can be sure it won't go down today."

"You brat!" Omar Asaf snapped.

"You're a brat yourself!" Volka replied as arrogantly. "Don't worry, I'll take care of the Sun."

"But what if it goes down anyway?" Omar Asaf asked, choking with laughter.

"If it goes down, I will henceforth fulfil your most stupid orders."

"Oh, no," Omar Asaf said triumphantly. "If the Sun, despite your conceited promise, does go down-and this will obviously happen-then I will eat you up. I'll eat you, bones and all!"

"And my slippers too," Volka added courageously. "But if the Sun does not go down today, will you obey my every command?"

"If the Sun does not go down, I will do so with the greatest pleasure, O most boastful and insignificant of magicians! But- ha-ha-ha-alas! This will never happen."

"It's still an open question as to who will say 'alas!' a few hours from now," Volka cautioned.

"Well then!" Omar Asaf said, shaking his finger in warning. "According to the present position of the Sun, it should go down in another eight or nine hours. I am even a tiny bit sorry for you, O shameless milksop, for you have less than twelve hours to live."

"You can save your pity; you'd better pity yourself."

Omar Asaf giggled scornfully, revealing two rows of small yellow teeth.

"What awful teeth," Hottabych sighed. "Omar, why don't you get yourself gold teeth, like I have?" It was only then that Omar Asaf noticed Hottabych's unusual teeth, and his soul was filled with the blackest envy.

"To tell you the truth. Brother, I don't find anything very special about gold teeth. I think I'd rather have diamond teeth."

That very moment, thirty-two crystal-clear diamonds sparkled in his mouth as he smiled spitefully. Gazing at himself in the little bronze mirror the old dandy carried in his belt, Omar Asaf was quite pleased with what he saw.

There were only three things that somehow clouded his triumph. First, Hottabych did not seem at all envious; second, his diamond teeth sparkled only when the light fell upon them directly. If the light did not fall upon them, he appeared completely toothless; third, his diamond teeth scratched his tongue and lips. In his heart of hearts, he was sorry he had been so greedy, but he did not show this so as not to lose face.

"No, no," he giggled, noticing that Volka was about to leave the cabin. "You shall not leave until the Sun goes down. I understand you only too well. You want to flee, in order to escape your deserved end. I have no intention of searching for you all over the boat."

"Why, I can stay in the cabin as long as you want. That will even be better. Otherwise, I'll have to hunt for you all over the boat when the Sun doesn't go down. How long do you think I'll have to wait?"

"Not more than nine hours, O young braggart," Omar Asaf said, bowing sarcastically. He snapped the fingers of his left hand and a cumbersome water-clock appeared on the table beneath the port-hole. "As soon as the water reaches this line," he said, tapping the side of the clock with a crooked brown nail, "the Sun will go down. It is the hour of your death."

"Fine, I'll wait."

"We'll wait, too," said Zhenya and Hottabych.

Eight hours slipped by quickly, because Zhenya could not deny himself the pleasure of suggesting that the conceited Omar Asaf learn to play checkers.

"I'll win anyway," Omar Asaf warned.

Zhenya kept on winning. Omar Asaf got angrier and angrier. He tried to cheat, but each time they caught him at it, and so he would begin a new game, which would end just as sadly for him.

"Well, the time's up, Omar Hottabych," Volka said finally.

"Impossible!" Omar Asaf replied, tearing himself away from the checker board.

Glancing quickly at the water-clock, he turned pale and jumped up from the berth where he and Zhenya had been sitting. He rushed to the port-hole, stuck his head out and groaned in terror and helpless rage: the Sun was just as high in the sky as it had been eight hours before!

Then he turned to Volka and said in a flat voice:

"I must have made a little mistake in my calculations. Let's wait two more hours."

"Even three if you like, but it won't help you any. It'll be just as I said: the Sun will not go down today, or tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow."

Four and a half hours later, Omar Asaf stuck his head out of the port-hole for the twentieth time, and for the twentieth time he saw that the Sun had no intention of sinking beyond the horizon.

He turned as white as a sheet and trembled all over as he crashed to his knees.

"Spare me, O mighty youth!" he cried in a pitiful voice. "Do not be angry at me, your unworthy slave, for when I shouted at you I did not know you were stronger than I!"

"Does that mean you think you can shout at me if I'm weaker than you?"

"Why, certainly."

They all felt disgusted.

"What a brother you have," Zhenya whispered to Hottabych. "Forgive me for saying so, but he's a most unpleasant, envious and vicious old man."

"Yes, my brother is no lump of sugar," Hottabych replied sadly.

"For goodness' sake, get up!" Volka said with annoyance, as the old Genie remained on his knees and kept trying to kiss Volka's hands.

"What are your orders, O my young but mighty master?" Omar Asaf asked submissively, rubbing his soft palms together and rising.

"At present, there's only one; don't you dare leave this cabin for a second without my permission!"

"With the greatest of pleasure, O wisest and most powerful of youths," Omar Asaf replied in a self-abasing tone, as he regarded Volka with fear and

awe.

It was just as Volka had predicted. Neither that day nor the next, nor the third did the Sun go down. Making use of some small misdemeanour of Omar Asaf's, Volka said he would make the Sun shine round the clock until further notice. And not until he learned from the captain that the "Ladoga" had finally entered a latitude where there was a brief period of night, did he inform Omar Asaf of this, as his special favour to the undeserving, grumpy Genie.

Omar Asaf was as quiet as a mouse. Not once did he leave the cabin. He crept back into the copper vessel without a murmur when the "Ladoga" docked to the strains of a band at its home pier, from which it had sailed away thirty days before.

Naturally, Omar Asaf was extremely reluctant to return to his bottle, if even for a short period, since he had already spent so many unhappy and lonely centuries there. But Volka gave him his word of honour that he would let him out the minute they reached home.

There is no use denying that as Volka left the hospitable "Ladoga," carrying the copper vessel under his arm, he was sorely tempted to toss it into the water. But there you are-if you've given your word you've got to keep it. And so Volka walked down the gang-plank, having conquered this momentary temptation.

If no one aboard the "Ladoga" ever stopped to wonder why Hottabych and his friends were taking part in the expedition, it is quite clear that the old man had no trouble casting the same spell over his young friends' parents and acquaintances.

At any rate, their relatives and friends accepted it as a matter of course that the children had been in the Arctic, without questioning how in the world they had ever booked berths on the Ladoga."

After an excellent dinner, the children told their respective parents the story of their adventures in the Arctic, keeping almost true to the facts. They were wise enough to say nothing about Hottabych. Zhenya, however, was so carried away, that the rash words nearly slipped out of his mouth. When he described the performances the passengers had put on in the lounge, he said:

"And then, of course, Hottabych could not leave it at that. So he said...."

"What a strange name-Hottabych!" Zhenya's mother said.

"I didn't say 'Hottabych,' Mother, I said 'Potapych.' That was our boatswain's name," Zhenya said resourcefully, though he blushed.

However, this went unnoticed. Everyone looked at him with awe, because he had met and talked with a real live boatswain every single day of the journey.

Volka, on the other hand, nearly had an accident with the copper bottle. He was sitting on the couch in the dining room, explaining the difference between an ice-breaker and an iceboat to his parents with a true knowledge of his subject. He did not notice his grandmother leaving the room. After she had been gone for about five minutes, she returned holding ... the vessel with Omar Asaf inside!

"What's this? Where did you get it. Mother?" Volka's father asked.

"Just imagine, I found it in Volka's suitcase. I started unpacking his things and found this very nice pitcher. It will be lovely as a decanter. I'll have to polish it, though, because it's so terribly green."

"That's no decanter!" Volka cried and turned pale. He grabbed the vessel from his grandmother. "The First Mate asked me to give this to his friend. I promised him I'd deliver it today."

"My, isn't this a strange vessel," said his father, a great lover of antiques. "Let me have a look at it. Why, there's a lead cap on it. That's very interesting...."

He tried to pry it off, but Volka grabbed the vessel frantically and stammered:

"You're not supposed to open it! It's not supposed to be opened at all! Anyway, it's empty inside. I promised the First Mate I wouldn't open it, so's not to spoil the threads on the screw."

"Look how upset he is! All right, you can have the old pitcher back," his father said, letting go of it.

Volka sat back on the couch in exhaustion, clutching the terrible vessel; but the conversation was all spoiled. Soon he rose. Trying to sound casual, he said he would go to , hand in the pitcher and dashed out of the room.

"Come back soon!" his mother called, but by then he had already vanished.

WHAT GOOD OPTICAL INSTRUMENTS CAN LEAD TO

Zhenya and Hottabych had been awaiting Volka on the bank for a long time. It was very still. The vast sky was spread above them. The full moon cast its cold, bluish light.

Zhenya had brought his binoculars along and was now looking at the moon.

"You can dismiss the astronomy club," Volka said, coming up to them. "The next act on our show is the solemn freeing of our good friend, Omar Asaf! Music! Curtain!"

"That mean old thing will have to manage without music," Zhenya muttered.

In order to emphasize his loathing for the horrible Genie, he turned his back on the vessel and studied the moon through his binoculars for such a long time, that he finally heard Omar Asaf's squeaky voice:

"May your humble servant, O mighty Volka, ask what purpose these black pipes serve which your friend Zhenya- and my greatly esteemed master-has pressed to his noble eyes?"

"They're binoculars. It's to see things closer," Volka tried to explain. "Zhenya's looking at the moon through them, to see it better. It makes things bigger."

"I can imagine how pleasant such a pastime can be," Omar Asaf said ingratiatingly.

He kept trying to peep into the binoculars, but Zhenya purposely turned away from him. The conceited Genie was cut to the quick by such a lack of respect. Oh, if not for the presence of the almighty Volka, who had stopped the Sun itself with a single word, then Omar Asaf would certainly have known how to deal with the unruly boy! But Volka was standing beside them, and the enraged Genie had no choice but to ask Zhenya in a wheedling voice to let him have a look at the great planet of the night through such interesting binoculars.

"I join my brother in asking you to do him this favour," Hottabych added.

Zhenya reluctantly handed Omar Asaf the binoculars.

"The despicable boy has cast a spell on the magic pipes!":

Omar Asaf cried a few moments later and crashed the binoculars to the ground. "Instead of making things bigger, they make the moon much smaller! Oh, some day I will lay my hands on this boy!"

"You're always ready to abuse people!" Volka said in disgust. "What has Zhenya to do with it? You're looking through the wrong end."

He picked up the binoculars and handed them back to the angry Genie. "You have to look through the small end."

Omar Asaf followed his advice cautiously and soon sighed:

"Alas, I had a much better opinion of this celestial body. I see that it is all pock-marked and has ragged edges, just like the tray of the poorest day-labourer. The stars are much better.-Though they are much smaller than the moon, they at least have no visible faults."

"O my brother, let me see for myself," Hottabych said and he, too, looked through the binoculars with interest. "This time I believe my brother is right," he added with surprise.

This made it only too clear that Omar Asaf had long since fallen greatly in his estimation.

"What ignorance," Zhenya scoffed. "It's high time you knew that the moon is millions of times smaller than any of the stars."

"Enough! I can no longer take the constant mockery of this brat!" Omar Asaf roared and grabbed Zhenya by the collar. "Next, you'll say that a speck of sand is bigger than a mountain. I wouldn't put it past you. Enough! This time I'll do away with you for good!"

"Stop!" Volka shouted. "Stop, or I'll bring the Moon down upon you, and not even a wet spot will remain where you now stand! You know I can do it with my eyes closed. I think you know me by now."

The enraged Omar Asaf reluctantly let go of a frightened Zhenya.

"You're raving for nothing again," Volka continued. "Zhenya's right. Sit down and I'll try to explain things to you."

"You don't have to explain anything to me. I know everything already," Omar Asaf objected conceitedly. Yet, he dared not disobey.

Volka could talk about astronomy for hours on end. This was his favourite subject. He had read every popular book on the structure of the Universe and could retell their contents to anyone who'd care to listen. But Omar Asaf obviously did not want to listen. He kept on snickering contemptuously. Finally unable to control himself any longer, he grumbled:

"I'll never believe your words until I convince myself of their truth."

"What do you mean 'convince yourself'? Don't tell me you want to fly to the Moon in order to be convinced that it's a huge sphere and not a little saucer?"

"And why not?" Omar Asaf asked haughtily. "Why, I can fly off today, if I want to."

"But the Moon is millions of miles away."

"Omar Asaf is not afraid of great distances. And all the more so, since-forgive me-I greatly doubt the truth of your words."

"But the way to the Moon lies through outer space, where there's no air," Volka objected conscientiously.

"I can manage quite well without breathing."

"Let him go! We'll have plenty of trouble with him if he stays," Zhenya whispered fiercely.

"Sure, he can go," Volka agreed quietly, "but still, I consider it my duty to warn him about what awaits him on the way.... Omar Asaf," he continued, turning towards the conceited Genie, "bear in mind that it's terribly cold there."

"I am not afraid of the cold. I'll be seeing you soon. Good-bye!"

"If that's the case, and if you've decided to fly to the Moon, come what may, then at least listen to one piece of advice. Do you promise to obey my words?"

"All right, I promise," the Genie answered condescendingly, his awe of

Volka obviously diminishing.

"You must leave the Earth at a speed of no less than eleven kilometres a second; otherwise you can be sure you'll never reach the Moon."

"With the greatest of pleasure," Omar Asaf said, compressing his thin blue lips. "And how big is a kilometre? Tell me, for I know of no such measurement."

"Let's see now. How can I explain?... Well, a kilometre is about a thousand four hundred steps."

"Your steps? That means there are no more than a thousand two hundred of my steps in a kilometre. Maybe even less."

Omar Asaf had an exaggerated idea about his height. He was no taller than Volka, but they could not convince him of this.

"Be sure not to crash into the cupola of the Heavens," Hottabych admonished his brother, not being completely convinced of Volka's stories about the structure of the Universe.

"Don't teach someone who knows more than you," Omar Asaf said coldly and soared into the air. He instantly became white hot and disappeared from view, leaving a long fiery trail behind.

"Let's wait for him here, my friends," Hottabych suggested timidly, for he felt guilty for all the unpleasantness Omar Asaf had caused them.

"No, there's no use waiting for him now. You'll never see him again," Volka said. "He didn't listen to my advice, which was based on scientific knowledge, and he'll never return to the Earth. Since your Omar took off at a speed which was less than eleven kilometres a second, he'll be circling the Earth forever. If you want to know, he's become a sputnik."

"If you have no objections, I'll wait for him here a while," a saddened Hottabych whispered.

Late that night he slipped into Volka's room. Turning into a goldfish, he dived silently into the aquarium. Whenever Hottabych was upset by anything, he spent the night in the aquarium instead of under Volka's bed. This time he was especially upset. He had waited for his brother for over five hours, but Omar Asaf had not returned.

Some day scientists will develop precision instruments that will make it possible to note the smallest amount of gravitation the Earth experiences from the tiniest of celestial bodies passing close to its surface. And then an astronomer, who, perhaps, read this book in his childhood, will determine, after long and laborious calculations, that someplace, comparatively close to the Earth, there rotates a celestial body weighing a hundred and thirty pounds. Then, Omar Asaf, a grouchy and narrow-minded Genie who turned into an Earth satellite because of his impossible character and ignorant scoffing at scientific facts, will be entered into the great astronomical catalogue as a many-numbered figure.

Someone who heard of this instructive tale about Hottabych's brother once told us in all seriousness that one night he had seen something flash across the sky which in shape resembled an old man with a long flowing beard. As concerns the author of this book, he does not believe the story, for Omar Asaf was a very insignificant man.

HOTTABYCH'S FATAL PASSION

For several days Hottabych remained in the aquarium, pining away for his brother. Gradually, however, he got used to his absence and once again everything was back to normal.

One day he and the boys were talking quietly. It was still rather early and the old man was lolling under the bed.

"It looks like rain," Zhenya said, looking out the window.

Soon the whole sky became overcast with clouds. It started to drizzle.

"Shall we turn it on?" Volka asked off-handedly, nodding towards a new radio set his parents had given him for being promoted to 7B. He turned it on with obvious pleasure.

The loud sounds of a symphony orchestra filled the room. Hottabych stuck his head out from under the bed.

"Where are all those people playing so sweetly on various instruments?"

"Golly! Hottabych doesn't know anything about radios!" Zhenya said.

(There was one omission on the "Ladoga" for all its excellent equipment-they forgot to install a radio set in the lounge.)

For nearly two hours the boys watched Hottabych delightedly. The old man was overwhelmed. Volka tuned in on Vladivostok, Tbilisi, Kiev, Leningrad, Minsk and Tashkent. Songs, thunderous marches, and the voices of people speaking in many tongues obediently poured forth from the set. Then the boys got fed up. The sun peeped out and they decided to go for a walk, leaving a fascinated Hottabych behind. The strange events which then occurred remain a mystery to Volka's grandmother to this very day.

Soon after the boys left, she entered Volka's room to turn off the radio and distinctly heard an old man coughing in the empty room. Then she saw the dial turn by itself and the indicator move along the scale.

The frightened old woman decided not to touch the set, but to find Volka immediately. She caught up with him at the bus stop. Volka was very upset. He said he was improving the set, that he was making it automatic, and he begged his grandmother not to tell his parents what she had seen, because it was supposed to be a surprise for them. His grandmother was not at all comforted by these words. Nevertheless, she promised to keep his secret. All afternoon she listened anxiously to the strange mumbling coming from the empty room.

That day the radio played on and on. At about two o'clock at night it went off, but only because the old man had forgotten how to tune in on Tashkent. He woke Volka up, asked him how to do it, and returned to the set. A fatal thing had happened: Hottabych had become a radio fan.

HOTTABYCH'S NEW YEAR VISIT

During the winter vacation, Zhenya went to visit his relatives in Zvenigorod. On January 4th he received a letter, which was of extreme interest for at least three reasons. In the first place, this was the first letter he had ever received in which he was addressed by his full name, as a grown man. In the second place, it was the first letter Hottabych had ever written to his young friend. But of greatest interest were the contents of this most remarkable message.

Following is the letter, slightly abridged:

"O most lovable and precious friend, the sweet and singular adornment of all schools and sports fields, the fond hope of your native arts and sciences, the joy and pride of your parents and friends, Zhenya ibn Kolya, from the famous and noble family of Bogorads, may your life's road be strewn with thornless roses and may it be as long as your pupil, Hassan Abdurrakhman ibn Hottab, wishes it to be!

"I hope you remember how great my joy and gratitude were when, six months ago, you, O my young friend and friend of my young saviour, released my unfortunate brother Omar Asaf ibn Hottab, from whom I was so grievously separated for many centuries, from his horrible imprisonment in the copper vessel.

"But immediately following my first joy of a long-awaited reunion, there came a terrible disappointment, for my brother turned out to be an ungrateful, short-sighted, narrow-minded, grouchy and envious person. And he, as you well remember, took it upon himself to fly to the Moon, in order to be convinced whether its surface was truly covered with mountains, as our highly educated friend Volka ibn Alyosha stated, basing his knowledge on a science called Astronomy.

"Alas! It was not a selfless thirst for knowledge that guided my unwise brother, nor the noble and exemplary desire to discover the World, but a vain and ignorant wish to belittle and shame a person who had tried to hold him back from committing a fatal deed.

"He did not even take into account the laws of another science called 'Mechanics,' and thereby doomed himself to an eternal and useless circling of the Earth, which, as I recently discovered (who could have ever dreamed of it!) in turn revolves around the Sun!

"Three days ago I received a message from you, O Zhenya ibn Kolya,

which bears the scientific name of 'Telegram,' and in which you so graciously and pleasantly wished me a Happy New Year. And then I recalled that my unpleasant, but extremely unfortunate brother is spinning round in the sky day and night and that there is no one to wish him a Happy New Year. And so, I prepared for a journey, and exactly at noon I took off for the far distances of Outer Space, in order to visit Omar Asaf, to wish him a Happy New Year, and, if it were at all possible, to help him return to the Earth.

"I will not tire your kind attention, O Zhenya ibn Kolya, with a description of how I was able to manage the Law of Universal Gravitation. For this is not the purpose of my message. Suffice it to say that at first I took off at approximately the same speed as Omar Asaf, and, as he, I turned into a satellite of the Earth, but only temporarily, and only long enough for a meeting with Omar. Then, when I saw it was time for me to return to the Earth, I turned to face it and assumed the speed necessary for overcoming the forces which revolved me about the Earth, just as a pail of water tied to a string would revolve round a boy who held the string. It is of no use to write what my speed was. When I next see you, I will show you all the calculations I did with the aid of my knowledge of Mathematics, Astronomy and Mechanics, which you and Volka ibn Alyosha so graciously and patiently taught me. But this is not the point in question. I sincerely wished to visit my poor brother...."

Hottabych had apparently burst into tears at this point, for the ink was all smudged. That is why we find we must leave out several lines.

"Leaving the Earth, so full of cheerful noonday light behind, I soon entered an area as black as pitch that was terribly and unbearably cold. As before, the far-off stars sparkled in the icy darkness with a bright but dead, unblinking light, and the pale yellow disk of the flaming Sun blinded my eyes.

"I flew on and on, amidst the cold darkness and silence. I was about to despair, when, suddenly, on the black velvet of the sky, there appeared a skinny body, brightly illumined by the Sun. It was approaching me at tremendous speed, and the long beard flowing behind like the tail of a comet, as well as the incessant and vicious grumbling, told me beyond doubt it was my brother.

" 'Salaam, dear Omar!' I cried, when he came abreast of me. 'How is your health?'

" 'Not bad,' Omar answered reluctantly and in an unfriendly voice. 'As you see, I revolve around the Earth.' He chewed his lips and added dryly, 'Tell me what you want. Don't forget that I'm a busy man. State what you want and be off.'

" 'What are you so busy at, O my good brother?'

" 'What do you mean what at?! Didn't you hear me say I'm now working as

a sputnik? I keep revolving like mad, day and night, without a moment's rest.'

" 'O woe is me!' I cried in great sorrow. 'How sad and uninteresting your life must be, amidst this eternal cold and darkness, in constant and useless revolving, apart from all living things!' And I burst into tears, for I was so terribly sorry for my brother. But in answer to my heartfelt words, Omar Asaf replied coldly and haughtily:

" 'Don't feel sorry for me, for I am less in need of pity than anyone else on Earth. Just look around and you'll be convinced that I'm the largest of all celestial bodies. True enough, both the Sun and the Moon shed light-though I don't-and are even quite bright, but I am much larger than they are. I don't even mention the stars, which are so small that a great multitude of them could fit on my finger-nail.' Something which resembled a kindly smile appeared on his face. 'If you wish, you can join me and become my sputnik. We will revolve together. Then, not counting me, you'll be the largest of all celestial bodies.'

"In vain did I rejoice at this brotherly show of affection, though it may have taken a rather strange form, for Omar Asaf continued as follows:

" 'All celestial bodies have their sputniks, but I have none. It makes me feel inferior.'

"I was amazed at the ignorance and stupid conceit of my brother. I understood that he did not want to return to the Earth and so said with a heavy heart:

" 'Farewell, for I am in a hurry. I still have to wish some of my friends a Happy New Year.'

"But Omar, who, apparently, had his heart set on this idea of his, roared:

" 'Then who will be my sputnik? You had better remain of your own free will, or I'll tear you to bits!'

"With these words he grabbed hold of my left leg. I kept my wits and turned sharply to a side, wrenching free of Omar, though leaving in his grasp one of my slippers. Naturally, he wanted to catch up with me, but he could not do so, for he had to continue his endless journey around a circle known by the scientific name of 'orbit.'

"Flying off to a good distance, and still feeling a bit sorry for my unpleasant and conceited brother, I shouted:

" 'If you are so in need of sputniks, O Omar Asaf, you shall have them!'

"I yanked five hairs from my beard, tore them to bits and scattered them about. Then many-coloured, beautiful balls, ranging in size from a pea to a large pumpkin, began revolving around Omar Asaf. These were sputniks worthy of him both in size and in beauty.

"My brother, a short-sighted person, had apparently never thought of making his own sputniks. Now, in his great pride, he desired to have a sputnik the size of a mountain. And so, such a sputnik immediately appeared. But since the mass of matter within this mountain was hundreds of thousands of times greater than the weight of my scatter-brained and ignorant brother Omar Asaf, he immediately crashed into the new celestial body he had created and bounded off it like a football. With a terrible wail, he began revolving around it at top speed.

"Thus, Omar Asaf fell a victim to his terrible vanity by becoming the sputnik of his own sputnik.

"I returned to the Earth and sat down to write you this letter, O you, who have all good assets, in order that you do not remain in ignorance of the above events.

"I also hurry to add that on Gorky Street, at the radio store, I saw a wonderful set with nine tubes. And its virtues are endless. Its appearance would please the most choosy eye. It occurred to me that if I were to attach...."

The letter then continued as a typical radio fan's letter would, and there is no sense quoting it, for radio fans will not find anything new in it, and those who are not interested in this branch of communications will find nothing in it worthy of their attention.

EPILOGUE

If any of the readers of this really truthful story are in Moscow on Razin Street and look in at the offices of the Central Board of the Northern Sea Route, they will probably see among the dozens of people putting in applications for work in the Arctic an old man in a straw boater and pink slippers embroidered in silver and gold. This is Hottabych. Despite all his efforts, he has not been able to procure a job as a radio-operator on some polar station.

His appearance alone, with the long grey beard reaching down to his waist, a sure sign of his undoubtedly advanced age, is a great hindrance in finding employment in the harsh conditions of the Arctic. However, his situation becomes still more hopeless when he begins to fill in the application form.

In answer to the question: "Occupation," he writes: "Professional

Genie." In answer to the question: "Age," he writes: "3,732 years and five months." As to family status, he replies simple-heartedly: "Orphan. Single. I have a brother named Omar Asaf who, until July of last year, lived on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean in a copper vessel, but who now works as an Earth satellite," etc., etc., etc.

After reading his application form, the personnel manager decides that Hottabych is slightly crazy, though the readers of our story know only too well that what the old man has written is nothing but the truth.

Naturally, it would be no trouble for him at all to become a young man and to fill in the form as it should be; or, if the worst came to the worst, to cast the same spell on the personnel manager as he had once before, when he and his friends boarded the "Ladoga." But the trouble is the old man has decided he wants to get a job in the Arctic honestly, without any fakery at all.

However, he has been visiting the Board offices less and less frequently lately. Instead, he has decided to study radio technology, to learn how to design his own radio equipment. Knowing his abilities and his love for work, it is not such a hopeless matter. What he needs now are competent teachers. Hottabych wants his young friends to be his teachers. All they could promise him, as we already know, is that they will teach him what they learn from day to day. Hottabych considered this and decided that it was not such a bad idea after all.

Thus, both Volka and Zhenya are very conscientious, straight "A" pupils, for they don't want to fail their elderly student. They have agreed that they will help Hottabych finish secondary school together with them. But at this point their roads will part. As you recall, Zhenya had long since decided to become a doctor, while Volka shares Hottabych's passion. He wants to become a radio engineer, and I assure you that he will make his way in this difficult but fascinating field.

It remains for us to bid farewell to the characters of this story and to wish the three friends good health and good luck in their studies and their future lives. If you ever meet them, please say hello to them from the author who invented them with great love and tenderness.
